



Makishima
Suzuki
ill. Yappen

Welcome to Japan,

5

MS. Elf!

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Chapter of Slavery, Episode 9: To the Land of Dreams and Magic

Birds could be heard chirping from the other side of the curtain. The sunlight peered through its opening, and I began to open my eyes from its brightness.

It was seven o'clock in the morning. The air on weekend mornings seemed to have a gentler feel to it than usual. Maybe it felt that way because it was the first sunny day in some time. We were still smack dab in the middle of the rainy season, but we were blessed with good weather today. The one who had predicted this was a draconian woman, which made me reflect on how strange my circle of friends was.

Strangely, I'd been able to journey into a dream world whenever I went to sleep for as long as I could remember. I would enjoy my dreams to my heart's content, then head to work when I woke up. Even when I came to find out that it wasn't just my dreams, but a fantasy world that actually existed, my lifestyle didn't end up changing much.

No, actually, I couldn't say it was exactly the same. Ever since waking up in this room with a certain elf girl, I felt my world changing bit by bit. I had come to know many people, headed into an ancient labyrinth, and not only did I befriend a dragon, but I eventually became friends with the floor master that I was supposed to defeat, Shirley. You could say I hung around some strange company.

"Haah... But what should I do about this...?"

I let out a sigh that wasn't fitting for such a beautiful morning. There was actually one thing troubling me about my acquaintances.

I looked down to find a lump in my blankets. It was about the size of a person, and I felt the weight of something soft upon my chest. If it was just as I had seen in my dream... No, the golden hair that spilled out from under the blanket was all the confirmation I needed to know this was a continuation of the events from last night's dream. Sun-tanned skin and long ears like that of an elf. A member of the notorious race of dark elves was sleeping soundly right here with me.

Her nose brushed up against my neck, tickling me as she exhaled softly in her slumber. The signature sweet scent of a woman wafted up from beneath the blankets, and I couldn't keep my heart from beating harder.

I-I can't just move around carelessly here. What should I do?!

But a dark elf truly was an uncommon sight. I'd spent about twenty years in the dream world, but I'd only seen one a few times. The dark elves I'd heard about in stories possessed incredible and terrifying power. And from what I had heard, their thoughts were always tainted with evil.

I hadn't really talked to one in earnest myself, so it was hard for me to say whether they were good or evil. Regardless, she seemed quite

comfortable as she slept, breathing quietly in regular intervals. It was hard to believe that in my dream, she had just perished from getting impaled through the heart.

Supposedly, her name was Eve. I had heard as such just before dying in the dream world.

She was lucky. I just so happened to be right where she landed, and we just so happened to die at the same time. My ability to travel between the dream world and this one activated at just that moment, and I woke up to find her here with me. Thinking back, it was such a fortunate set of coincidences that I let out a sigh of relief.

The one who had pointed his wicked sword at me was a man named Zarish, who was also known as the hero candidate. But it wasn't as if he had a grudge against me. In fact, I didn't remember ever having a proper conversation with him. Judging from what he was saying, he was more interested in Wridra and Marie than my life.

I figured he simply wanted to increase the collective power of his party by recruiting a powerful draconian and an elf who was proficient in Spirit Sorcery. As such, he must have decided I was in the way and drew his sword on me. I couldn't even put up a fight with a 60 level difference, and I was honestly annoyed that I was killed within seconds. But it didn't end there; Zarish even killed Eve, his own ally.

"So we both died at the same time, and we woke up here together..."

I let out a troubled sigh. I couldn't tell whether I should have been relieved that things ended without any major incidents or lament the fact that such a troublesome man had set his sights on me. No, this was definitely better than having this girl die without even knowing what was going on. I would have felt bad for her if that happened.

"Though, I don't know which one she would have preferred..."

Maybe Eve heard what I said, because her long ears twitched, and then I heard her sniffing. She must have sensed an unfamiliar smell, and she slowly raised her face until her chin was resting on my chest.

Despite her sleepy state, there was a sense of strength to the look in her eyes, which I noticed were a beautiful blue color. She had a healthy skin tone on her well-toned muscles, too. I couldn't let my guard down with her, but I casually looked away from the contrast of light and shadow on her sunlit chest. This went without saying, but she was definitely a grown woman. Though, now wasn't the time to be thinking of such things.

"Just so you know, this isn't my fault." As soon as I made my excuse, I felt her elbow press down against my throat. Of course, since I was a complete amateur when it came to ground fighting, all I could do was let out a muffled cry. She quickly mounted me despite my struggling, further restricting my movement. She had me restrained with what seemed like martial arts used by the military, and I was completely subdued within moments. Eve shifted her weight onto my throat, causing the bed to creak loudly.



"Nnnnnn!"

"Did you think you had me captured?! At least you get to see something nice before you die... Wait, why am I alive?" She asked in a puzzled tone.

Maybe she remembered a bit of what had happened in the dream world. The thought seemed to distract her, and she let up the pressure just a little bit. I seized this chance to quickly take in a fresh breath of air. It was still hard to breathe with her on top of me, but I managed to avoid choking to death. I continued to take in shallow breaths and spoke to her while averting my eyes from her naked body.

"You died, Eve. You died with me, and we woke up together." I told her as such in Elvish, and her eyebrows shot up. It seemed my explanation exceeded her capacity to understand. If she didn't stop to consider my words here, I may have really been killed.

I wasn't going to do anything to her or put up a fight. I showed her my open hands to convey this, and she let a little more weight off of my throat. My vision was going red, and I was on the brink of losing consciousness, so I coughed for some time.

"Y-You may not be able to tell with me being an adult now, but I'm Kazuhiho."

"Huh? The hell are you talking about? That's some crazy talk, coming from such a sleepy-looking face. You may have the same black hair, black eyes, face, and voice, but... Wait, it really is you!"

She ripped my pajamas open, leaving me dumbfounded. Well, she was a type I'd never encountered before. The corner of my mouth twitched.

"There's no wound...!"

"Oh, you wanted to see my wound? Yours should be healed, too."

She touched her own chest while maintaining her surprised expression. The wound from getting her heart pierced through was now completely gone. She may have just woken up from a dream, but there was no mistaking that it had actually happened. It was up to her whether to interpret it as a nightmare.

Meanwhile, I had cold sweat pouring down my face. I thought she was going to strip me naked, too, and I had no idea what she would do next. It seemed this dark elf was very impulsive and tended to take action before thinking about it, which made her completely unpredictable.

Not only that, but she made no move to cover her bare chest, which I found quite troubling. As in, I didn't know where I was supposed to look as I talked to her.

Although it was an extremely tense situation, I wanted to go get Marie as soon as possible, since I had left her behind in the dream world. There was just one problem. There was no way I could go back to sleep in this situation.

Well, Wridra was with her the last time I saw her, so she probably wouldn't have been in too much trouble if I was a bit late in going to get her.

"E-Eve, would you mind covering up right about now?"

"Huh? Ah! Wh-What are you looking at?!" She slammed a pillow down on my face. I wasn't even looking! In fact, I was trying my hardest not to look, so that was rather unfair of her.

I thought she felt somewhat familiar, but maybe that was because she reminded me of the kids these days. She was unpredictable, for one thing, but her tanned skin was reminiscent of gyarus, even though she was a resident of the fantasy world.

"Well, just give me some time to explain. I'll bring you something to drink, so I'd be relieved if you'd pick out an outfit from that closet in the meantime. Are you okay with sweet drinks, Eve?"

"Yeah, but... Why are you acting all familiar all of a sudden?" Maybe it was because I was only able to see her as a modern young girl now. Her race had a huge gap between their appearance and their actual age, but I still couldn't help but feel like she was younger than me mentally. But these thoughts probably would have been considered pretty rude, so I made sure not to voice them out loud.

The mention of a sweet drink seemed to pique her interest. I was relieved to find that she had covered herself up with the blanket, as requested. Her eyebrows were still furrowed, and she maintained that scary look in her eyes, but I found that I didn't mind too much when I convinced myself she was still young.

I woke up, still in my torn up pajamas, and decided to languidly walk over to the kitchen. I lived in a 1DK condo, so there were no room partitions, and I could hear Eve moving around behind me.

"Ahhhhh!!!"

I nearly jumped at the sudden, historic cry. It was loud enough that it could've startled the neighbors, so I turned around in a panic.

"What now?!"

I found her staring at her finger, with her dark-skinned back turned toward me.

"It's gone! It's gone! My precious ring!"

"Ring...? Oh, I did see Zarish taking it, and you can't bring anything other than food or drinks into this world, anyway." I couldn't even tell if Eve had heard me. She remained there, motionless, for some time, so I let out a sigh and walked back toward the fridge. I took some milk out and poured it into a mug, then put it into the microwave. By the time it started moving, I heard the sound of sobbing.

"Uuu... He abandoned me... Even though I've been with him the longest..." She crumpled up and laid face-down on a pillow, and I couldn't find the right words to say to her. No, it was probably best not to say

anything now. I was still an outsider who didn't understand the circumstances.

The microwave beeped to let me know the hot milk was done, so I slowly looked away from her back.

I placed the mug on the table, then opened the closet to look for something in Eve's size. The problem was, she still hadn't started looking for clothes to wear. Considering I was a healthy male, one would think the woman would be the one who would care about her appearance. Though, there was no time for complaints.

Come to think of it, none of Marie's clothing would have fit her. Left with no other choice, I decided to choose from one of my smaller hoodies. I placed it in front of Eve as she continued to cry, and she looked up at me with puffy eyes. She even had mucus running down her nose, and the juxtaposition of her feeble expression compared to her earlier attitude was quite shocking.

I liked to think I knew how it felt to be abandoned. Because of all the pain I had gone through as a child, I had a soft spot for people like her. Maybe that was why my voice was much gentler as I spoke to her.

"Here, put this on, and join me at that table over there."

"..."

I turned away and headed back to the table before she could reply. I sat down on the wooden chair and absently watched the blue sky through the window. After some time, I heard the sound of rustling fabric from behind me. The sound of pained breathing mixed with sobbing and weeping was making my heart ache. She cried as quietly as possible, and I couldn't help but think about what kind of environment she had been in up until now.

Now, I decided to think about what had happened while Eve was getting dressed.

Why had Wridra proposed her challenge in the first place? She had pretty much provoked the hero candidate, causing him to turn his blade on her. Knowing her, she probably could have found a way to avoid conflict, beat him down, or give advice so we didn't end up clashing. But she had chosen one of the branching paths of fate. I was attacked by Zarish as a result, but she had let this happen knowing I wouldn't die.

Does that mean Wridra wanted me to fight him? Against a Level 140 monster like him? A 60-level difference was like the power difference between a full-grown adult and a child. But it was unlikely that she wanted me to lose. I knew this because we supported each other, and she was both my teacher and my friend. The path she'd chosen was probably the right one. I wasn't sure why, but I felt like one day I would understand.

"Hmm. Then, she probably won't tell me even if I ask..."

"...Why are you talking to yourself?" I turned around to find Eve wiping her eyes with a sleeve. My eyes widened, seeing the front of her hoodie wide open, then beckoned her over. I grabbed the fastener and pulled it up a bit for her.

"You close it by pulling it up just like that. Think of it like a new button. Be careful not to pinch your skin."

"Huh? Whoa, this is actually really nice." She blinked her big eyes, and her surprise at the modern clothing helped hold back her tears a bit. Ah, but I wished she'd stop exposing and hiding her cleavage by pulling it up and down. I could almost hear them jiggling, and she really needed to understand that I was someone of the opposite sex. Watching my internal debate on whether or not to stop her, Eve looked at me with a puzzled expression.

I placed the mug of hot milk in front of her, and she quietly sat down across from me. Maybe it was because she had cried so much earlier, but she seemed completely different now, like a child that would obediently listen to whatever I had to say.

"The sky here is a different color. Is this Eden?"

"No, this is a country that's not on your maps, called Japan. I don't think you've heard of it," I said to her as she looked around curiously.

Eden was the realm where people were said to go after death in the other world. Nobody knew if it really existed, but everyone believed in it. But if this really were Eden, she probably would have accepted it without protest. Even the glass window was unfamiliar to her, and she was clearly bewildered by the three-flavor furikake seasoning on the table. Well, at least they helped her stop crying.

"If you want, we can go back to your world, too. I personally think it might be a good idea to stay here and calm yourself down a bit more."

"What?! But... I don't have anywhere to go even if I went back..." Eve stood up suddenly, then remembered what had happened and sat back down. Her emotions seemed to have a lot of peaks and valleys. Eve peered into her mug and took a whiff of its contents. She seemed to be drawn by its sweet scent, and I watched her take a small sip like a curious animal. She seemed to enjoy the hot milk with honey. Her blue eyes widened as she continued taking small sips, alternating between saying, "Hot," and "Mmm."

"Well, you don't need to decide right away. Luckily, we have plenty of time, and you dark elves live so long that we humans envy you."

"Come to think of it, why do you know how to speak Elvish? I haven't seen very many humans go out of their way to learn it. It's really hard to pronounce, too."

"I didn't need to learn it or anything. I wanted to learn how to speak it because I didn't know how to."

"Huh? I don't get it. I hate how humans say weird stuff like that. You wanna sound smart or something?"

"Hmm, but don't you think it'd be kinda cool if you could speak five languages?"

"Oh, well, I do get that, but I'd think a person who could do that would be really weird." I chuckled. I kept this a secret because it was kind of

embarrassing, but I greatly admired the Elvish language. It was said that a person could speak it to convey their thoughts to spirits, too, and that those with a disposition for it could actually see and speak to spirits. How could I not have learned it after hearing something like that? But it did make me feel a bit self-conscious to speak about it passionately like that.

"Well, even a guy like me could put in the effort for the sake of living... Though, I do remember having a lot of fun learning. What about you, Eve? Did you not like learning the human language?"

"I didn't hate it. He taught me back then, and it was... fun studying..." The ends of her eyebrows drooped downward, and big beads of tears began welling up in her eyes again. She must have been remembering her past. I felt bad for the pain she was going through as she recalled her many memories. I watched Eve sob again, and then I decided to open my mouth.

"Do you mind if I ask you for a favor?" Eve wiped tears away from her eyes and looked up.

"I'm gonna go pick up Marie and Wridra, so I'd like you to wait here for a bit. I don't intend to keep you trapped here, of course, but I think you still need some time to settle down."

"What do you mean, pick them up?"

"I don't really get it, either, so it's kinda hard to explain. You can just sit there and watch." She thought about it for a moment, then nodded. I wanted to avoid letting her know about my ability to travel to the dream world since she was connected to Zarish, but I had no choice. And so, I had secretly set my resolve. Until I settled my matter with Zarish, I wouldn't bring her back to him. I almost seemed like the bad guy, plotting such things.

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It was my second time awakening today, and I couldn't sit up upon waking once again. It was no wonder, considering a white-haired girl was using my arm as her pillow with her soft cheek pressed against it.

I usually would have waited for her to wake up, but today was a day off that I'd been waiting for for a long time, and I had to be conscious of people watching us. I whispered that it was morning into her long ear, and her pale purple eyes opened sleepily.

"Morning... Umm, today was..." I almost expected Mariabelle's big eyes to make audible noises as they blinked, and she gazed right at me. Then, she slowly brushed aside the blanket and turned her back toward me, which was surprising, considering her low blood pressure.

Hair still a mess, she let out a "Wow" in a dazed voice. A vast expanse of the blue sky could be seen past the fluttering curtains, revealing clear weather that contradicted the weather report.

She began shifting around to get up, then looked up while sitting with her legs folded in front of her. With her back turned toward me, I couldn't tell what kind of expression she wore. But with the tips of her long ears drooping and her hair gently swaying in the wind, I had a feeling she was

enjoying the moment. Anyone would have smiled at such a sight, and I was glad I had already set plans to go out today.

"Hm, so the weather cleared, as I thought. My hunches are not to be underestimated." I turned around to face the voice that came from behind to find a black-haired woman yawning. It did somewhat detract from her beauty, but I thought she was just fine like this.

"I don't think you can call it just a hunch when it comes to you, Wridra. You were even expecting me when I woke up at the riverbed."

"I have become far too accustomed to your scent already. Finding out where you will appear is a simple task."

Indeed, when I returned to the dream world, I found myself at a riverbed that was far away from my original location. When I opened my eyes, the two girls had been squatting over me, and they poked my cheek with a finger.

"I'm glad about that. We were able to come back quickly thanks to you." There were no devices like smartphones over here, but we had the Mind Link Chat. The dream world worked in strange ways, but it was a good thing we could avoid getting separated from others.

But the time to be talking leisurely was over. The blanket that had been hanging on Marie's shoulder slipped down to her thigh, revealing her collarbones. I quickly moved her neck back to her original position. Marie then squeezed her eyes shut.

"Hah, hah, it seems you are doing just as Marie ordered. You are quite diligent, for a male."

"Well, 'ordered' is quite a rude way to put it. Any man who doesn't take good care of women is unattractive, and I think you should start learning to wear sensible clothing." It was pitch dark, but I could hear the two talking from behind and in front of me. It seemed Marie had more to say, but she decided to talk to the person next to her instead.

"Oh, Eve, was it? It's a good thing you made it out safely. I'd like to point out that you just so happened to be lucky that time, so you shouldn't do anything reckless from now on."

"Wh-Wh-Wha...?!" Although I couldn't see in the dark, I could tell what sort of expression was on Eve's face right now. Seeing us appear in the bed suddenly, she was probably pointing right at us and flapping her lips. I didn't feel like explaining in detail, and it wasn't like I could have done a good job of it, anyway. Not to mention, with all the fuss going on, we were way past our expected departure time. So, I wanted to get right into enjoying the precious weekend.

"Okay, everyone, today we go have fun. Let's wash our faces and get changed."

"Ohh, I can't wait! I just love this moment when we're about to go out. It makes my heart beat with excitement!"

"Mmph! Yes, yes, I understand. This is indeed an exhilarating feeling. I cannot help but smile as if a delicious meal has been laid out before me." I

heard a cute little clapping noise, which I figured was Marie and Wridra high-fiving each other. Personally, I wanted them to go get changed already so I could start making breakfast. But before that, I spoke to Eve, who must've been sitting there without any idea of what was going on.

"Umm, you're free to wait here while we go out, but if you wouldn't mind, how would you like to go with us? I guarantee it'll be a fun weekend that'll surprise you."

"Huh? Hang out? ...Where?"

"Grimlaaand!"

Ah, the other two ladies had answered for me. It was a giant theme park that was the pride of Kanto, so maybe their excitement was to be expected. It was near the city center and was large enough to fit twenty Tokyo Domes within its perimeters, with over 20,000,000 attendees each year. They had been looking forward to this day during the long rainy season, so they probably couldn't wait a moment longer.

I wasn't just inviting her on a whim, either. Eve had suffered a deep trauma, and she needed time to heal. Just like how her tears had stopped when she saw the three-flavor furikake, Grimland was sure to help her just as much, if not more so. It wasn't just that I didn't want to miss out on this sunny day within the rainy reason.

The girls went to the washroom while chatting excitedly amongst themselves, and I was finally allowed to open my eyes. There stood Eve, still in my hoodie, with her eyes wide open. She seemed confused on what to be surprised about first, and I smiled at her as her eyes darted around the room.

"This is kind of a regular thing, so let me say this. Eve, welcome to Japan, a land full of recreation, fun, food, and culture. You aren't gonna get bored until you go to sleep, just so you know." It felt refreshing to see her blinking her blue eyes, considering she nearly choked me to death not too long ago.

I opened the rice cooker, and a cloud of white steam filled my vision. I scooped some rice with the scooper, letting out quiet yelps of "Hot, hot," as I shaped them into rice balls.

Meanwhile, the girls continued to prepare for the outing, and I could hear their cheerful chatter from the dressing area. I envied how much fun they seemed to be having, but it wasn't like I could have joined them. To us guys, a girl's changing room was like a strange, alternate world that we were never allowed to step foot into.

I continued making rice balls in silence, and the first one to come out was the half-fairy elf, Mariabelle. She slid the door open, blinked her purple eyes a few times, and showed off her collared shirt and favorite navy skirt. The skirt with a suspender was adorable and made her look like she was going to a piano recital. The satisfied look on her face was quite cute, too.

"That looks nice on you. Would you mind if I got a closer look at the adorable Ms. Elf?"

"Hehe, I don't mind. Since you've always treated me so well, you get the privilege of looking all you want. Look, it even has a cute little ribbon on it." With that, she held up the corner of her skirt with two fingers and walked toward me, clearly in a good mood. But mid-way through her walk, she shouted, "Rice balls!" with her purple eyes glimmering, and seemed to have already forgotten about her promise to show me her outfit. She then wrapped her arms around me from under my arms, but I couldn't hug her back with rice all over my hands.

"Hey, could you make extra tuna mayo ones? I've always envied how Wridra gets to eat a bunch of them." It made me happy that she requested tuna mayo rice balls, but it was also strange, in a way. I'd thought elves mainly ate things like nuts, but such notions were completely invalidated in the past few months. Actually, maybe things hadn't changed too much since we started spending time together so I could learn more Elvish. I could feel her excitement to go to Grimland, and her contagious energy was getting me excited, too. The blue sky behind her made it hard to believe it was still the rainy season, and it was as if the skies themselves were celebrating this day. I watched the sunny scenery and opened my mouth to speak.

"The weather really is nice today. The report said it was gonna rain."

"Of course. We're destined to go out today, and not even rain clouds can get in our way. So, since you're making rice balls, are we taking the car today?" Marie's conjecture was right. We could get there faster taking the train, but with Eve having just arrived here, I wasn't too keen on having her walk through heavy traffic at the stations and streets. Marie and Wridra got used to it right away, but Eve had a sense of wildness to her, so I had a feeling she might stir up trouble a couple times. I wanted her to focus on having fun and preferred to avoid unnecessary trouble.

"We could still get there in about thirty minutes or so. Oh, looks like they're ready, too." The door slid open again, and Wridra and Eve stepped out. The tan-skinned Eve had her ears completely covered, and her healthy thighs were in full display between her short shorts and knee-high socks.

"Oh, you're gonna keep that hoodie on? You could wear whatever you want, you know."

"Oh, but this is nice and comfy. It's yours, right? Mind if I have it?" I didn't mind, if she didn't mind that it was a men's hoodie. Maybe it was an elf thing, but Eve was sniffing the hoodie with her nose against the sleeve as I answered her.

The oversized hat covering her head was likely prepared by Wridra. It was the same russet color as the hoodie, and had a sort of modern look to it. Though, her blonde hair, blue eyes, and hourglass body were likely to draw a lot of attention. Such thoughts went through my mind as I watched her, and she turned around.

"But that really was amazing. Wridra, was it? How do you make things like hats so quickly?"

"Hah, hah, I have been alive for many long years. That was nothing." Wridra smiled, and Eve let out an affirmative noise without questioning it further. But I wondered how Eve would have reacted if she found out she was talking to an Arkdragon that was over level 1000.

The dragon in question blurted out, "Rice balls!" and skipped over to me, so I completely missed the chance to introduce her.

"Mmf, my favorite! Hmhm, all tuna mayos belong to me!"

"No no, you need to share. Oh, did you get new clothes again? You seem to be into that gothic vibe lately," I pointed out, noticing the new long-sleeve shirt peeking out from the shoulder of her vest. The wide skirt that extended below her knees was black, her favorite color. The black-haired beauty nodded and peered over from beside me. Not at me, but at the rice balls.

"I did go through the trouble of learning clothing designs. It would be a waste not to show it off. Just as how it would be a waste to leave any rice balls uneaten." Wridra smiled as she said so around my eye level, but it felt like rice balls weren't really on par with what we were talking about.

With her pale complexion, just putting on a little lipstick accentuated her beauty quite a lot. People said that women had the ability to transform themselves, but it really did seem that way. But no matter how much her outfit may stand out, we were going to a flashy and lively amusement park, so she wouldn't seem out of place. We didn't have time to waste, either. I stuffed my bag with rice balls and tea, then turned to the others who were waiting for departure.

"Okay, looks like we're all ready to go. We didn't forget anything, right?"

"Good,"

"To,"

"Go. Wait, what?"

One of them seemed to be having a hard time catching up, but I decided not to worry about it. We all headed toward the front door. Once we got our shoes on, it was time to leave.

"Eve, I'll give you the honors of wearing the sneakers I really like. They're very light and durable, so you can run very fast in them."

"Huh. Whoa, it really is light. These are nice. I can have them?"

"No, I'm just letting you borrow them! I like them a lot, so I take good care of them." Eve looked surprised as Marie bared her teeth like an upset cat. Judging by the fine features of Marie's face, Eve seemed to think she was a mild-mannered girl. But Marie was actually quite the opposite. She never went against her own beliefs, and she pursued her thirst for knowledge and curiosity without holding back.

Realizing this, Eve stared at her with a curious look and said, "Hm. You're gonna let me borrow these when you like them so much?"

"Yes, of course. I don't mind. But just take good care of them. I'll get upset if you treat them roughly."

Come to think of it, those shoes were the first things I bought for Marie when she came to this world. I remember being a bit embarrassed when trying to buy women's clothing and shoes for her. I was glad she liked them so much, but it made it hard to bring up the fact that they were actually pretty cheap. Yeah, it was best not to say anything.

"Oh, these are nice! They're a bit small, but I like the fit. I feel like I can run even faster than usual." Hearing her speak cheerfully, I remembered just how powerful Eve's legs were. When she stole the jewels last time, I had a hard time catching up to her even while using my teleportation skill. The way she tapped the ground with her toes as she deftly jumped around vaguely was reminiscent of sports athletes.

"You were really fast, Eve. What class are you?"

"You know, I don't want you asking things like that so lightheartedly. You really think I'd just tell you? People can strategize against you based on your class alone. You wouldn't want people asking you about yours, would you?"

"Huh, I don't mind. My class is Illusory Swordsman, but... You're probably not familiar with it, right?"

"Huh? No, never heard of it." She shot me a dubious look because of my extremely obscure class. I couldn't blame her, though. It was a class I had finally attained after about twenty years of solo play. I had no idea what the conditions were for unlocking it now.

Then I noticed Eve looking at her surroundings with her mouth agape.

"Whoaaa, there are so many of the same rooms lined up next to each other! How did they make this building? It's obviously not made of wood, and it's so high up... Ah! There are more of the same rooms above and below us! How many people are living here?!"

"A lot. Eve, you aren't going to last if you're surprised by something like this. She's going to bother the neighbors like this, so we should go downstairs already," Marie suggested as she pointed toward the staircase, so I agreed and adjusted the backpack on my back. If we got on the elevator with someone else, she'd probably start screaming about it moving on its own.

But come to think of it, Marie was really getting used to handling visitors from the other world. Such thoughts went through my mind as I went down the stairs after her. Moments later, Eve came running toward us, yelling, "Wait for me!"

"Nnnh, such clear weather!" Wridra had descended the stairs before us and was stretching with both arms spread out wide. The way she avoided inconveniences and got from point A to point B quicker than everyone else hadn't changed since she was in her black cat form.

When I caught up to her, I found myself surrounded by the clear blue sky, and I closed my eyes to enjoy the weather now that the rain was gone. The girls were right; you just couldn't beat that moment just before going

out. I was full of excitement, and Marie was all smiles as she called for me to hurry.

I felt a faint vibration in my chest pocket, and I looked at the smartphone screen to find a message of encouragement from Kaoruko that read, "Today is the day! Have fun!" I couldn't help but smile. She probably happened to see us leave from the floor above.

I had gone through strategy meetings with her to make sure our day at Grimland would be enjoyed to its full potential. I may have been from Aomori, but I had a duty to ensure the visitors from the other world would have the time of their lives here in Tokyo.

The sight of Marie happily holding onto Wridra's arm was as bright as the blue skies. Any time I wasn't sleeping was once filled with boredom, but my days were so full of life now. The change was staggering. The girls that had brought this change about probably didn't even realize it. As I considered these thoughts, I noticed one of the women was staring right at me.

"Hm, I didn't expect you to make a face like that," Eve said.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Look, your Mariabelle is calling for you."

What did she mean by "your"? And what sort of face was I making just now? But there was no time to think about such things. Marie was urging me to hurry from the entrance of the parking lot. It was already past the park's opening time. We had to leave quickly, or I could get scolded by a certain elf.

And so, I reached out and grabbed the car's door handle, but there was no way the dark elf wasn't going to react to a modern vehicle. She stared at the car wide-eyed, and I felt the urge to say, "I didn't expect you to make a face like that," but decided against it.

"What's this, what's this? Are we supposed to ride this thing?"

"Leave such comments for later! Get in, Eve!" Wridra pushed Eve's butt from behind as she stared into the car's interior, and she let out a cry as she was forced into the vehicle. I wanted to tell her not to use violence, but I understood her rush. Marie and I raised a thumb of approval, and I climbed into my seat, too.

It was time to depart.

The car began accelerating slowly, and I could hear weird "Oh, oh, oh!" noises from the back seat. I didn't have to turn around to know Eve was surprised. Marie and I looked at each other, and I had the feeling Eve was thinking something cliché.

"You're probably going to say 'What the?! It's moving without a horse!'" Marie said.

"Huh?! I didn't say anything yet!" She was probably thinking it, though. This was pretty much a given, and something they all went through once. Wridra also chuckled from beside her. Eve, who seemed to have a rather

competitive personality, furrowed her brows in reaction. Thankfully, she copied the rest of us and put her seatbelt on, and we were ready to go.

The car slowly left the parking lot and began driving on the road that was now free of rain. Then, the music started playing right on cue, and I looked over to find Marie had just started playing a CD.

The melody that began to play had a distinctive Showa flavor to it. It was perfect for a trip through Japan, and the lyrics full of emotion still had a strong core following. Marie and Wridra had sung their hearts out to it last time. They seemed to remember this, and I sensed someone suddenly sit upright in the back seat.

"Hrm! Yes, this is it! This drives my sense of adventure like none other."

"Doesn't it? I can't enjoy a Japan trip to the fullest without this music."

Hm, I thought it was a bit too local to call it a "trip." But I supposed it could be considered a mini-trip, and I smiled as the girls shook their heads along to the rhythm and sang together.

"I really don't get you guys..." Eve muttered to herself, but the other two were too into it to hear her. Of course, I couldn't help but join them from all the excitement, too.

And so, we continued driving down the road. With our spirits high from the wonderfully blue sky, we were headed for the land of dreams and magic.

It was said that nostalgic songs were called "golden oldies." But to people who were visiting this world for the first time, it probably sounded like a fresh melody. Rice balls and barley tea in a bottle were passed around as we enjoyed the moody music, and I could tell the elf and the Arkdragon were getting even cheerier.

Meanwhile, there was one passenger who was as quiet as a lamb. The tan-skinned woman was sitting directly behind the driver's seat, sweating profusely and clutching both her knees as she stared at the big bus that drove by outside the window.

"Eep! It's gonna crush me! It's so big and fast! Are the monsters in this world all like that?!"

"I-It's okay. Eve, why don't you try one of those rice balls? We won't be eating for a while, and the last tuna mayo is about to disappear."

"I-I can't eat like this! Wah! What's that huge thing?! How many people can that thing fit?!"

A giant tour bus drove by. It could probably have fit about fifty people or so inside, and it was heading toward the same amusement park as us. I wanted to take my time to explain, but we couldn't bring food into the park, and we had quite some time until lunch. I glanced over to Mariabelle in the passenger seat, and she nodded with her mouth full of rice.

"Eve, look. Here, this is a tuna mayo rice ball. And I'll leave some tea right here. I know you're surprised, but you can still eat, right?" Marie made her hold the items, and the fragrant scent of seaweed seemed to draw Eve's attention, as her nose started to twitch. Maybe dark elves also had a sharp sense of smell, being so closely related to Mariabelle. Since she had

just arrived from the other world, the scenery around us must have been quite shocking. But it seemed she couldn't beat the allure of the fragrance, and she opened her mouth to take a big bite.

"Hm...! Ah, what is this?!"

"It's a rice ball. A portable meal, and the pride of Japan. Tuna mayo is especially popular among them, and everyone reaches for these first. You need to get them quickly, or Wridra will devour them all," Mariabelle said like an older sister. They seemed quite different in appearance, but it was clear to see she was a kind girl who liked taking care of others. As a side note, since Eve couldn't speak Japanese, we had been speaking Elvish throughout the whole car ride.

"Well? Is it good?" Eve couldn't speak with her mouth full of food, so she simply nodded earnestly. The rice ball was made of white rice, seaweed, and tuna mayo, and its creamy flavor and umami filled one's mouth with every bite. White rice was full of sweetness to begin with, so its delicious taste could be enjoyed right up to the point where you swallow it.

Eve took a swig of the tea, then closed her eyes and cried out, "Mmmmm, delicious! This is that thing you were making earlier, right? You made it look so easy! How'd you make it?"

"I'll teach you how to make it when we get back, if you'd like. But I'm glad you're okay with rice, Eve. The dishes in this country are all based on complementing rice, so I would've been in trouble if you didn't like it."

"I'm totally fine with it. Actually, I like it. It's squishy and has a nice texture, and the sour-sweet flavor is kinda addicting. And I like how the black stuff wrapped around it smells, too."

Oh, it seemed she really enjoyed it. In response, I noticed Wridra wearing a smug expression as she sat back down in the back seat.

"Hah, hah, even I have yet to see the depths of this country's food culture. If I were to express it in levels, rice balls would be about level 5. Of course, 99 isn't the level limit."

"Whaaat?! No way. You're just trying to mess with me because I'm from the country," Eve shot back, but I thought that level 5 sounded about right for rice balls. Marie and I glanced at each other as I thought it over. In any case, I didn't actually know if there were distinctive country-born and city-born elves.

"Are there different kinds of elves? Her body structure seems a lot different from yours, and come to think of it, I really don't know much about dark elves."

"Umm, well. I'm from a forest tribe, and I suppose Eve is from an ocean tribe? Hmm, yes, I thought so when I first saw her. It's true that dark skin is a characteristic of dark elves, but in many cases, they were regular elves just like me to start with," Marie pointed at herself as she explained.

"For example, in my case, forest elves tend to seek knowledge. Their lifestyles usually don't change much, and they tend to spend a lot of time reading books or learning Spirit Magic. Elves that live by the ocean, both

male and female, tend to be physically stronger, so you should be able to tell them apart pretty easily."

Hm, she was right that the elves I saw in forests were usually on the slender side. Their height and build varied, and after speaking to them, I felt like Marie was comparatively more intelligent. I now understood that there were differences based on where they were from, but I was curious about the dark elves themselves.

"I'm what they call a dark elf. We use spirits the wrong way," Eve explained.

"The wrong way? What do you mean?" I asked, and Marie made a face like she was deep in thought.

"That's what they say, generally, but I don't know if I agree that it's wrong, per se. You take spirits into your body to enhance it, right? I think that's a logical method, too."

"Come to think of it, you guys aren't afraid of me at all for some reason. And you seem to know a decent amount about dark elves. Hey, do you have any more rice balls?" Eve asked, and it seemed to me like one of the walls she had up in her heart had been broken down in this conversation.

"If you're from an ocean tribe, maybe you'd like some cod roe," Marie said as she handed over a rice ball, and the expression on Eve's face confirmed my thoughts. Marie licked a piece of rice on her finger and smiled.

"Yes, my mother was a dark elf, after all. She was very scary when she got angry, but she's my kind mother who I'm proud of. So I have absolutely no prejudice in that sense."

"Oh, you mean Sharsha. That brings me back. You're right, she was very scary when she was angry," I said.

"She'd always pinch my cheeks whenever I did anything bad. She could easily catch up to me even when I ran away as fast as I could. I can't remember how many times I screamed as I tried to flee." We chuckled with each other as Eve watched us, wide-eyed. Sharsha was a woman who had taken care of me when I was learning Elvish, and I remembered her being absolutely wonderful. If I ever had the chance, I wanted to go see her again.

But if I were to do that, I had to reassess my understanding. Maybe there just weren't a lot of them out there, or they were living in hiding, because it was very rare to run into dark elves. Yet, I still heard rumors about them, and they were often referred to as a race cursed by the gods. But according to Marie's explanation earlier, it seemed like they had only enhanced their physical prowess by taking spirits into their bodies.

"So that's where she got that incredible leg strength from," I thought to myself as I glanced at the rear view mirror. Just then, our eyes met.

Eve drank some more tea, then wore a rather uncomfortable expression on her face. I wondered what was wrong, then she hesitantly opened her mouth.

“...Hey, when are you gonna ask me about Zarish? He did such horrible things, and you did nearly die, after all. You must be wondering about his objectives and his abilities, right?”

“Huh? I don’t have any intention of asking about that stuff,” I replied.

“Indeed. This is our day of leisure that we had been waiting for for so long. I forbid you to mention that man’s name from now on,” Wridra added.

“I agree. I don’t even want to think about such a creepy man.”

With all three of us hitting her with a disinterested reply, Eve was left dumbfounded, her blue eyes bulging wide. I couldn’t have left such a dangerous man alone, of course, but I would have been able to think of how to deal with him after we had our fill of fun.

As our conversation went on, we started seeing glimpses of hotels around the amusement park area. And as the excitement in the car grew, we merged onto the road that specifically led to the park.

§

“Fwaaah...” Marie let out a strange sound.

We hadn’t arrived at Grimland proper quite yet. Being a theme park that was the pride of Kanto, the streets leading there were quite well decorated.

“Nyaaa! The streets! The streets look so cute!”

The street lamps were adorned with cute decorations, and there were mascot characters ahead. The cheerful music that could be heard seemed to push us forward, and it was like a trail of snacks leading children to its entrance. It reminded me of an old children’s book.

What awaited us at our destination? Seeing Marie’s side profile, I could tell her mind was filled with such questions and curiosity.

“I’ve never been so excited. It’s like I’m in a picture book!”

Marie clutched my sleeve while pumping her feet in place, eyes sparkling with wonder. The sky was beautifully clear, and a castle-like hotel could be seen in the distance. The girl from the dream world flapped her navy skirt and spun in place, seemingly unable to contain herself.

She wasn’t acting like her usual self—or maybe she was? I’d expected her to at least follow up by blushing and clearing her throat. Not only were the surrounding scenery and music cheerful, but so were the faces of those who walked by. Nobody laughed at Marie for her jubilation, and her smile was as bright as the blue sky when she turned to face me.

“Come on, let’s go inside already. If we stand around for too long, we’ll end up at the very back of the line.”

“Huh, they really put a lot of money into this place. There’s no way the amusement park at Aomori could compete.”

“Goodness, are you really thinking about money at a place like this? It’s hard to tell if you’re a romantic or not. Here, let’s hurry inside.” The girl gave me a look like I was hopeless, then naturally held my hand. I felt a bit awkward about people seeing us with our fingers intertwined, but Marie began walking off right away, and I followed after her as if I were being

dragged along. I didn't even notice the unamused look in Wridra's eyes as she watched us. She then complained to the woman next to her.

"Be strong, Eve. Now that you have come to this world, you must be sure not to let your mind be infected by that sickly-sweet air that makes one want to claw at their own chest. Hmph, I cannot understand how they can consider each other just friends when they behave that way."

Question marks popped up around the dark elf woman's head as she watched Wridra sigh while massaging her brows. Who could have blamed her? Wridra was powerful enough that even the hero candidate immediately wanted her in his party, and she was thought to be the driving force behind the first and second floors of the ancient labyrinths being cleared.

But she didn't act particularly high and mighty, which was made apparent by the conversation in the car and the way she had helped Eve change. Eve thought it must have been an act to lower her guard at first, but seeing the Arkdragon with an expression that was so gloomy that she could have curled up in a ball on the floor any second, it didn't seem like she had the capacity to do such a thing.

Though, Eve did understand what Wridra was trying to say. Her blue eyes followed the couple's backs, and she parted her plump lips.

"Well, yeah. It seems like they don't even notice what they're doing. But you didn't have to come if you didn't wanna deal with that kinda stuff, right?"

"Fool, why should I sit at home by myself?! I looked forward to coming to Grimland from the bottom of my heart, and I have been counting down the days on my fingers! Hah, hah, just you watch. I will not succumb to that sickly-sweet atmosphere."

Her expression was filled with determination as she took a bold step forward. Why did she have to work herself up so much just to head to this "Grimland"? Eve was unable to understand it at all, and she followed after the dragon with the surprise still visible on her face.

Today happened to be a sunny day after all of the rain we'd been getting, so people had been drawn to the theme park in droves. Judging by how cheery everyone looked, it seemed they were all sick of the constant gloomy weather. Of course, the girl at our lead wore a brilliant smile, as if representing how everyone else felt.

Now, I had four tickets in my hand. They each featured different characters, but the different designs didn't really mean anything. They were just extra details for the guests to enjoy. There were pictures of a rabbit, a frog, a dog, and a cow.

I turned around with the entrance ticket in hand to find Marie looking around with great interest. I approached her as she took in her surroundings with her pale purple eyes wide open, and she finally met my gaze.

"This is amazing! Everything is so elaborately designed, like that impressive clock tower. I was told it's a place where children play, so I thought it would be a lot more carefree."

No no, she had it all wrong. This place was made by adults who weren't messing around. One could have called it a world full of hopes and dreams. It was said that in order to fool kids, you would need to be able to fool grown-ups first. Similarly, this place was made so adults would have been able to have fun, too.

"That's what I heard from Kaoruko, anyway. Marie, which entrance ticket do you want? Wridra and Eve haven't noticed yet, so you can choose whichever one you like."

"Oh, such pretty colors! Hm, let's see... Hmm... If there's no significant difference between them, I don't mind which one I get at all. But if I were to pick..."

She stared at me with a serious look in her eyes, and I was a bit taken aback. She extended her finger and let it roam around a little. It hovered back and forth between the rabbit and the frog several times, completely contradicting what she had just said. And finally, she plucked a single ticket from the bunch.

"I choose the rabbit. It's not because it's cute or anything like that. As you know, this is an animal that's very common in the elven forests. It just gives me a sense of familiarity is all," she explained rather calmly, but her sight never left the ticket in her hand, and I could see a faint smile curling the edge of her lips. She let out a puff of air from her nose, seemingly satisfied with her selection.

"I'm glad you seem to like it. Put it in this case so you can hang it around your neck by the cord attached to it. Now, which one do I pick...?"

"Oh, is that the entrance ticket for Grimland? I shall choose one, then." Wridra's head peered in, and she took the one printed with the image of the frog picture without hesitation, unlike the elf girl. Come to think of it, Wridra was always surrounded by lizardmen, so maybe frogs were creatures she was familiar with in a way, too. As I considered this, a pair of blue eyes met mine next.

"Just the cow and the dog left? Aw, then I'll take the dog. You're pretty sleepy-looking, so the cow probably suits you better, anyway." Eve grinned as she took a ticket, leaving me with the last one. I really didn't mind which one I got, but I had to admit that seeing the half-asleep cow's face was slightly saddening.

"Okay, don't forget to put your ticket in the case and hang it around your neck. It'll be a huge problem if you end up losing it," Marie said. I couldn't tell if she was just looking out for me or turning me into a laughing stock. Seeing the two sleepy-looking faces matching one above the other, the three girls burst into laughter.

I see, so she wanted to turn me into a laughing stock.

I took the group through the gate, and before us stood a crowd at the shopping district. Looking up, there was a clear ceiling to shield us from any rain, and even this managed to draw surprised noises from the other three.

"The entire ceiling is covered in glass. Amazing. It takes an incredible amount of weight and durability to support such a thing," Wridra said.

"I don't get it at all. Why do they use so much money on this?" The answer was: because the returns would justify the investment. Of course, the ticket I paid for was just a portion of it. Marie turned her eyes toward the surrounding buildings.

"Wooow, cute! So cute! Everything around me is adorable!"

She was all-smiles and having a great time. The colorful buildings were definitely right up her alley. Just as I predicted earlier, the wide street was designed to be charming, as if you had wandered into a picture book. Everything was constructed with intricate care, and these girls must have truly felt like they entered another world.

"Damn, I totally underestimated this place. That weird 'car' thing was really tiring, but I'm glad I got to see this place."

"Huh? Oh, no. This is just a souvenir shop."

"Huh?" Eve said as her eyes widened, and Wridra had a similar reaction next to her.

"Don't tell me they put up that glass ceiling and made this cityscape just for shopping?"

"They did, but, hmm... We'll stop by later if you're still interested, but let's keep going for now."

Otherwise, the lines for the rides were going to keep getting longer. I held Marie's hand so we wouldn't get separated, and we slowly made our way through the foot traffic. At the center of the shopping district was a big stick of bamboo showing off its vivid, fresh green.

"Hm, what is that? Some sort of Japanese tradition?"

"Umm, that's probably for Tanabata. We still have some time, and it varies by region, but there's an event called Tanabata on July 7th where you write wishes on strips of paper and hang them up."

I was a bit surprised by its presence, too, despite being the one explaining the process. I didn't know they would be applying Japanese culture to a park with a western setting like this. Marie, who was walking next to me, loved things like stories and traditions. She responded with curious *oohs* and *ahhs* as she repeatedly turned back and forth between the bamboo and me.

We made our way through the shopping area, and the girl let out a surprised noise again. She squeezed my hand and stopped in her tracks.

"Ahhh! Look, look! A castle! The roof is blue! It's just like the one in that movie! See? It's the same shape!"

The way she pointed as she tried her hardest to explain was absolutely adorable. I wanted to keep my cheeks from breaking into a grin, but I wasn't quite sure if I was able to pull it off.

"Hm, it might be real if you say so. Up until now, I was wondering if it was a very similar lookalike."

"Oh, don't you worry. That's the real castle. I would be able to tell right away if it's fake. The sad thing is, an imitation would've had an obvious unnatural look to it." The confident look on her face as she said so nearly made me crumple to my knees. Endure. I had to endure. She may have been adorable, but I didn't want to destroy her dreams. I outwardly maintained my calm, but I was internally screaming.

Contrary to our excitement, Wridra and Eve were staring at the castle rather solemnly. Curious to know what they were talking about, I strained my ears to listen.

"Hmm, the windows are small, and the tower extends quite high up," Wridra observed. "I'm no expert or anything, but my gut tells me there's some sort of long-ranged magic user hiding up there. From that height, they could really take advantage of materialization magic..."

Whoa, they were talking about some unsettling stuff. How could they think that an enemy would be lurking at a merry place like this? Maybe a person's imagination went in weird directions when they got too used to castles in fantasy worlds.

I needed to show these two what sort of place this theme park was. Otherwise, they were going to hold on to this mistaken notion the entire time. And so, I decided to take the group to an attraction full of splashing water that men and women of all ages would enjoy.

We were in a cave surrounded by craggy rocks. Of course, it wasn't made naturally, but deliberately created for this facility.

Characters popped out of holes and mumbled to themselves as the line moved forward slowly. Lighthearted organ music and whispers from various characters reverberated around us. Surrounded by scenery that was completely different from that of a normal cave, Marie's eyes glimmered as she nodded to the voices she heard.

"Amazing... It's just like when I open picture books. You know when you read me books at night? It feels just like that."

Marie was blushing slightly as she turned around, and she had the same expression as she did whenever I read her books. I wanted her to get a good sense of what kind of place this theme park really was, and her words were actually pretty on the mark.

"Yeah, we've wandered into a picture book. This is a lively land of animals that eat tasty food, and some of them are a bit mean. Like the drooling wolf, for example."

"My, how scary. Then you'll probably be the first to be eaten. I should tie you down so I can escape while you get caught," the girl said, with reddish-

brown rocks and thorns all around her. As she spoke, she spread out the fingers of both hands as if she was about to pounce and catch me.

Our surroundings were a bit dim, and her pale skin made her stand out in the darkness. This sight alone seemed like a scene from a picture book, I thought to myself.

We were in a land of animals, a world that couldn't be experienced in either reality or the other world. The characters spoke in a somewhat comical manner, and the view was just as vivid as the picture books. The elf, dragon, and dark elf couldn't help but feel their hearts beating quickly with excitement.

As we all listened to the vocal guide and read some descriptive text, Eve looked at us with a puzzled expression.

"Wait, so you guys understand the language of this world?"

"Of course. This world is the only place that's so full of entertainment. I worked desperately to learn everything from learning how to speak, to reading and writing," Marie replied.

"Indeed, I would be visiting this place many times over, so I quickly learned it, as well. Though, you are somewhat of the dumb archetype, so it may be difficult for you," Wridra added.

"Whaaat?! Who are you calling a 'dumb archetype'?! Hmph, I learned the common language humans use in only three years. I'm smarter than I look, so don't go making fun of me, all right?"

She crossed her arms with a self-satisfied expression, but... Three years, huh? I was having trouble figuring out how to respond. I glanced to my side to see Marie, who had learned basic Japanese in just a month or so, and Wridra, who used a skill slot to learn it on the day she arrived. Both of their mouths were making strange squirming motions with expressions that were hard to describe.

I felt an elbow nudge me, and I realized it was a request from Marie to do something about this awkward air. And so, I cleared my throat and gave her my best cheerful expression.

"Well, we're just average commoners, so there's not much we can do. As long as we keep taking one step forward at a time, I'm sure our dreams will come true."

"Get your hand off my shoulder! I'm not stupid, and I don't wanna be grouped with a sleepy-looking guy like you!"

"Oh, but he knows a broader range of languages than I do. I've never seen a human who started by learning Elvish and ended up learning the language of giants, too."

Oh, that was right. Well, when you play for twenty whole years, languages were a thing that someone would just kind of pick up along the way. Such thoughts crossed my mind, but Eve's face wore an expression of sorrow, as if she had just been betrayed by a friend running a marathon with her. I could almost hear her heart sinking.

"Wait, what? Don't tell me I really am dumb...? My teacher who taught me the common language told me that I was smart a bunch of times..."

I had the feeling he had told her that to make Eve feel better. Even Wridra was looking at her with an expression of pity.

"F-Forgive me, I did not realize it was this bad... I will get you something sweet later. Cheer up."

"That doesn't make me feel better at all!" Eve shouted, her face red with anger, but it seemed her archetype was now set in stone. Though, on my end, I was a bit relieved, since I was usually surrounded by such smart people.

Our conversation went on, and our turn came up before I knew it.

A co-worker once told me that couples that couldn't keep up a conversation while waiting in line often ended up getting into fights. I was feeling pretty nervous about it, but it seemed that I'd been worrying over nothing.

Our ride made a splashing noise as it appeared, and Marie whispered, "Raft," with a cheerful tone. It appeared to be carved from a log, and it was closer to a canoe than a raft. Of course, it wasn't just any old canoe, but one that was designed so many people could safely ride within it at once.

It was strange to see Marie and the others obediently follow the staff member's orders. Then, I realized that since this was like a world inside a picture book, it wasn't all that strange for elves and dragons to be there.

What was about to happen? What was about to begin? Seeing the three ladies look around in anticipation made me smile. Before I knew it, Eve was enjoying herself, too, and the cautiousness she'd had in the beginning seemed to have started to fade away.

The ride began to move in the total darkness. The vehicle shook slightly, and Marie let out a small yelp.

"Ah, ah! It's moving!"

"It is a ride, after all. Think of it like a car. Hold on tight so you don't bump into anything," I replied. She nodded, but I wasn't sure if she was really listening. She stared straight ahead at a cute bipedal animal that was telling the beginning of his story.

He lived here with his close friends, spending each day in peace. But he explained that there were those who sought to eat him, hinting at the unrest that existed even in this fairytale world.

The story went on as the log ship made waves, slowly increasing its speed. Jaunty music and voices could be heard from all around us, and we continued our way through the rocky cave. The role of the character before us was to inform us of what sort of adventure awaited us, and that we were inside the world of a picture book.

"How cute," Marie whispered to me, and I nodded in earnest agreement. We eventually made it through the cave to be greeted by the blue sky, and Marie's eyes lit up at the sight of the reddish-brown rocks and the huge body of water ahead.

"It's that character from earlier! Maybe he lives here. How nice it must be to have a house next to a lake."

"Yeah, this is definitely a prime location to live. He may not look it, but maybe he's actually a huge real estate investor."

Then, as if he had heard our conversation, he waved right at us. Marie waved back without thinking, but he said something that made her smile freeze solid.

"This morning, I saw someone with weird eyes. He might be hiding somewhere around this village, so you should be careful, too. Whatever you do, don't go walking around all by yourself." He pressed a finger to his lips, then looked around as if sharing a secret. Marie's face grew tense as she watched his cautious gesture.

"I-It's okay. You've lived here for a long time, right? So I'm sure you'll be safe today, too."

I couldn't tell if Marie's voice had reached him or not. He looked rather worried and fiddled with the brim of his hat as he let out a sigh. Then, he uttered, "I'm scared."

But the log boat continued on, pressed forward by the flowing water. Worried about leaving the character behind, Marie looked back many times, but there was no stopping the story once it started. Just like a fairytale, you couldn't stop reading once you started turning the pages.

Everything went dark again, and I realized we were inside of a cave once more. There were rough rocks all around us, and perhaps it was the effect of what the character had said earlier, but there was a slight chill to the air. And just as the cheery music stopped playing, the floor below us became unsteady. We had started going down a steep slope. We felt airborne for a moment as the wind caressed our cheeks, and Marie squeezed her eyes shut.

"Kyaaaaaaaaa!"

The fear was all the more heightened without the ability to see what was in front of us. But this was just the beginning. The log boat immediately floated back to the surface, as if to tell us just that, sending a wave rippling around us.

Where are we?

Marie seemed to be thinking that to herself as she scanned her surroundings, and then lamps began lighting themselves along the waterway. The light lit up her eyes like amethysts, and watching her side profile made me feel like I really had stepped into a realm of fantasy. It was quite a striking sight.

Now, the forest animals were being surprisingly severe.

They were playing pranks on the wolf, setting traps, and laughing at him, as if to show that Marie's worries had been for nothing. Marie seemed flabbergasted, but she also let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh, I feel dumb for worrying so much. He really loves playing pranks, doesn't he? That wolf should surrender and leave the forest already."

She whispered in my ear as if asking for agreement, but I felt a bit conflicted. I felt a mix of ticklishness and a desire to stay close to her, but I also actually knew what was going to happen next.

No matter what, I had to avoid spoiling her. That was my mindset as I watched the animals live their fun, merry lives along with Marie. They were surprisingly good at singing and dancing, so she watched them with wide-eyed fascination.

She was enjoying the story, so she must have felt the change in the air. The cave suddenly turned darker, and the air somehow felt colder. The cheerful music began fading away, and a forlorn look overtook her expression.

Wolves were cunning creatures that plotted to catch their prey with unexpected methods. A spotlight illuminated the wolf's dark grin, making Marie even more anxious. Looking at her, I noticed her light skin had become even paler.

"Th-This is much scarier than our usual picture books. It's already spring, but the air feels like it's going to freeze over. Stay right where you are and don't move, okay, Kazuhiro-san?"

She wrapped her arms around mine and squeezed as she said so, and I was internally panicking. I could feel the beat of her heart directly, and anyone would forget all about the wolf with her sweet scent wafting in the air around her.

I didn't realize I was staring at the elf girl. Her pale purple eyes met mine, and she smiled right next to me.

"Oh, you're a scaredy-cat, too? Don't worry, I am, too. Let's root for the forest animals together."

Huh... why was I the one getting encouragement? It was just a misunderstanding, but maybe she felt a kinship toward me now. She drew in even closer, and I no longer even cared about the chill in the cave.

The animals were being quite a handful, too. They shattered the wolf's plots by tricking him with superior speaking skills. They hid themselves within some thorns, and the wolf chased them in a fluster.

Before we knew it, the log boat was moving faster, as if to give chase. The water flow was quicker than before, and water droplets splashed up and hit my cheek. We made it through the cave, giving us hope for the blue skies again, but the view ahead was completely blocked by a rocky stretch.

The first question that came to mind was a rather plain one: what lay beyond those rocks? We had gone through multiple drops by now, but we could hear the sound of rushing water drawing near. Both Marie and the one sitting behind me were getting a bad feeling about this.

"Hey, Kazuhiro! You tricked me! Th-There's a scary waterfall up ahead, isn't there?!"

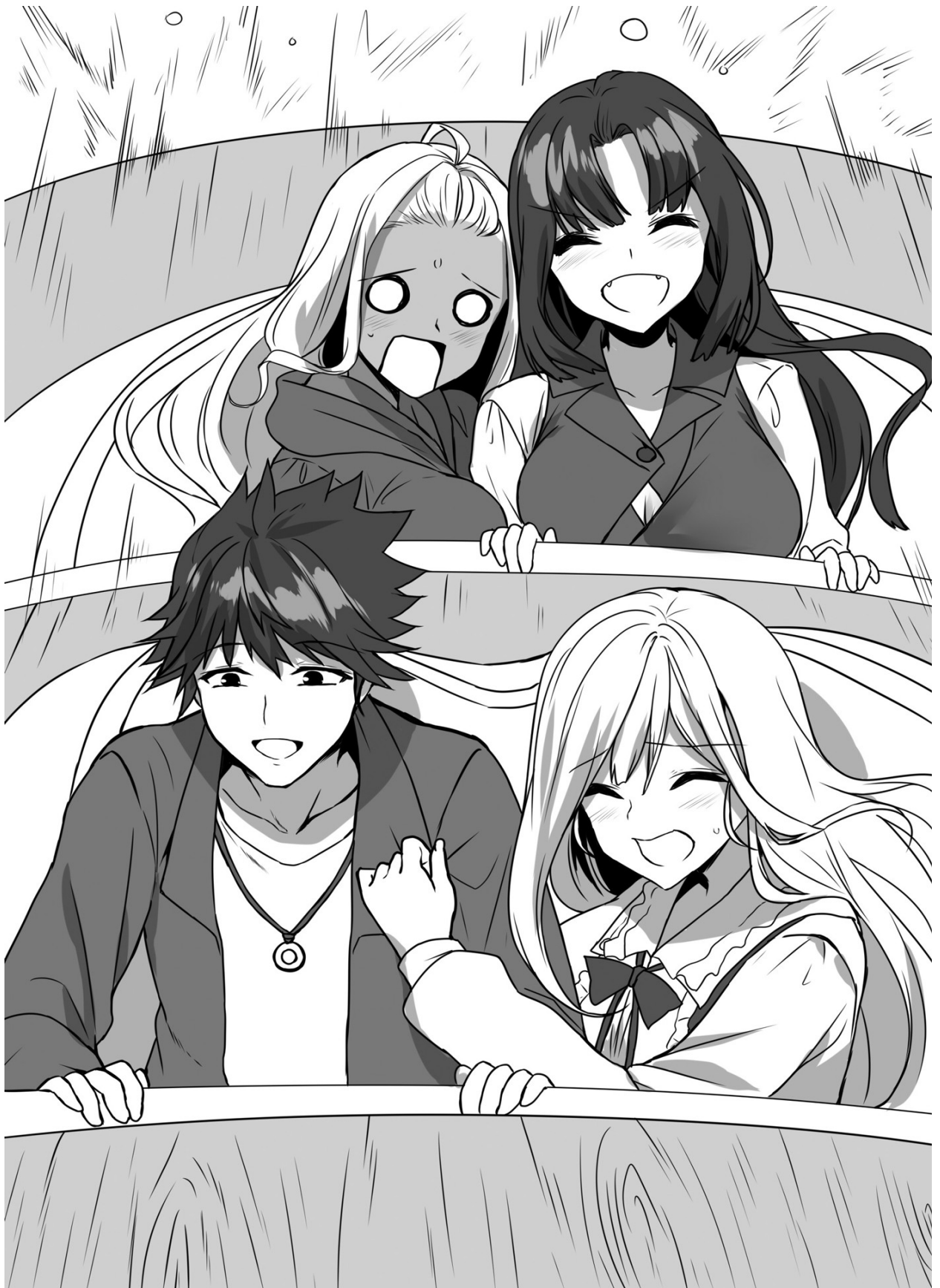
No, no, I didn't trick anyone. It would have been a spoiler if I had warned her, and since she was here for the first time, I wanted her to enjoy it to the fullest.

Our ride was placed up onto something with a *clunk*. As the log boat slowly tilted its angle, the elf and dark elf's faces turned more and more pale. When they saw the basin of the waterfall directly below us, the emotions they had been bottling up until that moment finally erupted all at once.

"Nnyaaaaaaaaa!"

We dove through water droplets as adorable screams echoed throughout Grimland. Under the blue, clear sky, the screams had reached many people's ears.

A photo appeared on a monitor, showing everyone's expression at the moment we plunged toward the basin. Marie and Eve's mouths were wide open, and they were each clutching on to the person next to them. Unlike those two, Wridra could be seen laughing joyously. It seemed a drop like that didn't even faze a dragon.



"Why don't we buy a picture as a souvenir? Everyone looks cute in the photos."

"Guhehe! Ahem, ahem, yes, indeed. We do look rather great in these pictures. Surely, they will make for great memories. We should buy them immediately."

"Absolutely not. I won't talk to you for quite some time if you buy such photos. It's up to you if you don't mind... Do you still want them?"

She shot me a cold look, and I realized this wasn't going to fly. It was dawning on me that there was a land mine directly under my foot, and I was about to step right onto it. Marie shot me a cold look, reminding me that her follow-up attacks were relentless at times like this. And yet, I still felt she looked cute, because she had already shot right through my heart. Ever since the day we first met, that is.

"Hm? What are you smiling about?"

"Oh, I was just remembering the day I met you. You were screaming pretty loud then, too. I think you may have been just as loud earlier." She blinked a couple times, then seemed to remember the distant past and parted her lustrous lips.

"I've heard there's an elven anecdote about seeing someone and never being able to forget about them. But I've also learned that rumors tend to get embellished a lot. Personally, I don't think I could ever forget your sleepy-looking face." With that, she pressed her shoulder against me. No matter how much time we spent together, I was always surprised by her beautiful eyes as she looked up at me. There was a sense of mysticism to their vividness, and her direct gaze never wavered as they sparkled in the sunlight.

I wondered what she was about to say, as her lips had partially parted. But they closed again, as if she'd reconsidered, and I wasn't able to hear whatever words may have been. I didn't understand the emotions welling up in my chest, either. Despite my feelings being my own, I had no idea how to put them into words. Seeing Marie's wavering eyes, I felt that maybe she was experiencing the same emotions, as well. But in that moment, we heard the voice of a woman who couldn't read the room at all.

"Hey, how come your face looks sleepy even when you're falling upside-down in the air? You're even weirder than Wridra, don't you think?"

"..." I blinked several times, then breathed in and out a few times as well before I could begin to interpret Eve's words. It seemed she was still wondering about the photo on the monitor.

"Hmm, I was scared. We fell pretty suddenly."

"Liar. You're definitely lying. That's a sleepy face if I ever saw one. I didn't notice at first, but you're pretty dense, aren't you? It's not so much that you've got guts, but it's like you don't care about anything besides whatever interests you."

I couldn't say anything in response to that. I was just a normal salaryman, and I felt bothered by being just a little bit late or worried about my boss getting upset. Considering my lifestyle, I thought I was far from being dense.

"See? Look. My mouth is a bit open, too."

"Just a bit! It looks more like you're just breathing out of your mouth!"

Oof, her voice was pretty loud. At a loss for what to do, I glanced over at the monitor again. Now that she mentioned it, maybe the look on my face wasn't really fit for this sort of attraction.

"Maybe it's because I'm always flying around in my dreams. There's no lifeline over there, and I've always been totally fine on thrill rides like these."

"Like waterfalls?! You've fallen from one before?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. You haven't?"

Eve squeezed both fists and thrust them downward. Then, she turned red, shouting, "Of course not!"

"He doesn't have very much common sense. He once told me about a time he willingly dove into a river that was flooding from a storm." Marie suddenly joined into the conversation, and I felt like I had been betrayed. I mean, I did do some reckless things back in the other world, but I was just having fun in my dreams... Though, such an excuse would have been completely ineffective on these two girls. Their "I can't believe you"s and "You're weird"s went on for a little while longer. I really had no retort to give in response to any of it.

But then, I realized something. Seeing Eve getting all worked up, I noticed she was completely different from when I'd seen her this morning. I reluctantly bowed my head and apologized for having no common sense. Eve responded, "That's right!" Marie joined in, laughing in a carefree manner.

It seemed she could laugh after all. I had seen her crying with a gloomy expression for so long that it was strangely quite a relief to see her let loose at the theme park. Maybe it was a good thing I'd brought her here. The thought crossed my mind as I watched her growing closer to Marie.

Just then, Wridra caught my attention. She was smiling as she drank juice through a straw. She must have bought it with the allowance I'd given her. Curious about the way she seemed to be watching over them, I quietly moved in closer.

"So, how much did the Lady Arkdragon foresee of all this?"

"As I have said before, it was merely intuition. But if you were able to realize that dark elves are not evil on your own, then that is the merit of you and Marie's own character."

Her lipstick left a mark on her straw, and her eyes with their long lashes narrowed into a smile. It was impossible to tell the true intentions of a dragon who was over level 1000. I watched the other two girls who were still staring at the monitor and laughing, and I whispered to Wridra.

"I'll do my best to figure out what to do about the whole Zarish situation. I feel like I shouldn't just let him be."

"Since olden times, conflicts with evil tend to last for extended periods of time. But you must be cautious. The thoughts of evil men will eventually manifest themselves in your own mind without you realizing it."

It was almost like a prophet telling a fortune. I felt like I could almost understand her abstract statement, but I couldn't quite shape it into something concrete. There was a mystical feel to her eyes that sparkled like the night sky.

"Hah, hah, I am relieved to see there is at least some resentment for him inside you. You have a tendency to avoid making any changes in the way you live. However, change occurs to everyone. Just like that dark elf who was released from the bindings of that ring." She then handed something to me: the partially-finished juice she was drinking. The droplet of condensation that touched my finger felt cold. Wridra placed her hand on my shoulder, and I couldn't tell if it was meant to be a gesture of encouragement or if she was forecasting the future.

I still didn't get to ask her why she made me face off with Zarish, but I had a feeling she didn't intend to tell me in the first place. Dragons had always been creatures that disliked boorish comments.

There was still a vague, murky feeling brewing inside me, but I just sipped on the juice while watching her walk away from me. The carbonated drink was melon flavored and chilled with some ice.

There were things about Zarish and Eve that I found rather distressing and troubling... but at this moment, I didn't notice that Eve herself was staring at me. The former subordinate of Zarish had a rather severe look on her face as thoughts raced through her mind.

(No way, was that an indirect kiss?! He just drank out of that straw Wridra was using... S-So it really is true that people in the city are more casual about these sorts of things!)

Despite the serious look on her face, her internal thoughts were rather silly. But to her, this was no laughing matter. She remembered the events from the morning when she had let her guard down because of his sleepy-looking face.

(Or maybe he's so dense that he didn't even notice it was an indirect kiss...)

She set her resolve and walked up to him, and he turned around with that perpetually-sleepy face of his.

"What is it?" he asked with that usual gentle tone, and Eve's shoulders jumped in response. There was something strangely mature about him.

"H-Hey, you just kissed Wridra indirectly. Don't you care about that kinda stuff?"

"Huh? Indirect kiss...? That's a bit dramatic." It seemed he wasn't just dense, and he understood the meaning of the words. But he gave his straw a glance, then laughed lightly. Perhaps his unconcerned demeanor indicated

that he didn't think of Wridra as someone of the opposite sex, or he simply had a calm personality to begin with. As Eve tried to figure it out, a cheery voice suddenly chimed in.

"Oh, that looks good. Can I have some?" Marie, who had been sitting next to Kazuhiho, took a sip from the straw, and Kazuhiho's expression immediately broke down. His cheeks became slightly pink, and his eyes drifted upward and to the side with an expression that made it hard to tell if he was troubled or smiling. Seeing such an expression on him for the first time, Eve's blue eyes widened.

(H-He just isn't aware of anyone but Marie!)

Kazuhiho's grip on the cup was far more tight than necessary, and his expression broke down further when Marie's fingers wrapped around his hand. Perhaps she was enjoying his reaction, because she wore a rather satisfied look on her face as her pale purple eyes watched the side of his face. There was an inexplicable sense of allure emanating from her, and Eve, too, felt her cheeks growing hotter.

(Wha... These two are even worse!)

Eve thought to herself in a fluster. Marie was the one holding the reins, and it seemed she was having quite a lot of fun with it as she wrapped her arms around him. Wridra's words about the "sickly-sweet air that makes one want to claw at their own chest" flashed through Eve's mind. Somehow, she managed to restrain the sudden urge to dump the cup of juice over both of their heads.

§

Lighthearted music could be heard from all around us. The theme park that was considered the pride of Kanto made us feel like we were in a picture book just by walking down the street.

There was a liveliness to the western-style buildings lining the streets, and the three women excitedly chatted about how pretty and big they were as they walked on. I could tell they were having the time of their lives even from behind, and it seemed Eve was starting to learn to enjoy the entertainment on her first day here. Occasionally, she turned around with a happy expression and asked me to take a picture.

The shutter sound rang out as I took a picture, preserving the image of the girls jumping together with a rabbit, full of joyous energy. Yeah, she really looked great in pictures. I looked at the picture, appreciating how cute her pearly smile was. I thought it was a shame to leave such a picture as just data, and I secretly decided to take it to a shop to get it printed later. But being able to take as many pictures of this adorable resident of the fantasy world as I wanted, I was able to understand how it felt to be a "photo otaku," who typically took pictures of things like railroads and such.

"Maybe I should get a single-lens reflex camera... No, but I won't get my bonus for a while. Hmm..."

"You know, you have a tendency to mumble to yourself sometimes. No matter how much time I spend with you, I could never shake my impression

of you being a strange human. Oh, that picture came out ni...ce..." Marie peered at my smartphone, then froze for some reason. She tensed up, then slowly turned her head up toward me.

"Wh-When did you take so many pictures? I'm also curious why I'm *always* at the center of the picture. Just look, you can't even see the bunny rabbit I like. Eve is only in two pictures... And those are just pictures she happened to be in with me!" Marie held up two fingers as she whispered low enough that the others couldn't hear, and I couldn't help but be surprised. I looked at the screen again, and she was right: the various pictures were all of Marie, featuring different expressions. Though, it was still only about thirty pictures or so.

"Oh, right. I get it. I didn't even realize... You're not supposed to only take pictures of what you like," I concluded.

"Th-Th-That's...not what I'm saying, but... Ah, I mean! No more taking pictures. You are to take a picture only when I tell you to. Otherwise, I'll be confiscating your phone, mister." Marie turned pink as she pinched my arm, and I couldn't believe she had ordered a ban on photography. I wasn't fazed easily, but even I felt a shock that almost brought me to my knees.

"Hey, wait a second. If all I need is your permission, I just need to ask whenever I want to take a picture. Then, I guess that's not so bad. By the way, Marie, I want to take pictures of you heading to the next attraction, so can you walk around candidly while enjoying the scenery?" I smiled as I asked the question, and Marie looked at me with a tight expression for some reason. A few minutes later, my phone was stowed away in the half-fairy elf girl's pocket, and I wasn't able to capture any photos of her image. There was nothing I could do as a cameraman when my subject had turned down my request to take photos. I was starting to realize a new hobby, but the dream had ended quite abruptly.

Yet, as I watched the three girls from behind without a smartphone in hand, I came to an unexpected realization. The residents of the fantasy world really stood out. But they seemed to blend in well to this brilliant environment, and the looks from strangers weren't all too noticeable here. I came to the happy realization that maybe this place was an ideal spot to have fun for a dark elf that was usually scorned by others.

Then, Marie turned to look at me with her amethyst eyes and smiled.

"I understand what these attractions are now. Each of the facilities here have their own story, just like a picture book. It's set up so we can experience it from the same viewpoint as the characters." Ah, that was right. I had brought the girls to that place earlier to have them experience what sort of place Grimland was. With Mariabelle's smarts and her love for picture books, she was the one to figure it out as I had expected, and Eve looked at her with her blue eyes widened in surprise.

"Whoa, that's crazy. So there's a bunch of other stuff just like that one earlier?"

"They are all around us; too many to count. They are all there for our entertainment," Wridra explained as she spread open a map. The map featured countless attractions, just as she had said, and the elf and dark elf blinked several times as they stared. Then, their faces brightened, probably because they were imagining just how fun the rest of their day was going to be.

"Oh, wow! I didn't realize this place was so amazing! I'm so glad you brought us," Marie exclaimed. "All right, then let's go to the next attraction and enjoy everything Grimland has to offer."

The girls all raised their fists and shouted, "Yeah!" in unison. Ah... So cute and full of life.

Now, I felt bad for putting a damper on them, but I made the decision to bring them into a world of horror. Wridra was usually so full of confidence, but I remembered she had occasionally dropped comments about disliking scary things. I just couldn't contain my curiosity... Oh, no, this was just out of my own personal interest, so don't worry about it.

I watched the girls from behind as they frolicked about, and a grin spread across my face.

We were at a theme park in celebration of the sunny weekend amidst the rainy season. But even the girls who were cheerily running about earlier grew silent, sensing that something was off. It was sunny just moments earlier, but there were dark clouds gathered at the mansion ahead.

Thunder rumbled overhead, and the sight that was unbefitting of the dreamland was more than unsettling. Marie's voice trembled as she spoke to me, my hand in hers.

"...Not there. That's not where we're going, is it?"

"Hmm, this is my first time coming here, too, so I can't tell just by looking at the building. Umm, I think it was called something-mansion."

This was no good. I had done so much pre-planning, but I had forgotten the name of the attraction. I had no choice but to head for that building up ahead. I glanced over at Wridra, and it seemed like the corner of her mouth was tightly drawn. Good, good... I mean, what was wrong with her?

"H-Hey, is it just me, or are we getting closer to that mansion? And our surroundings are getting kind of scary..."

"Now that you mention it, the air is getting a bit colder. But it's still a bit hot, considering the season, so maybe it's just right," I said with a smile, but a look spread across Marie's face, as if she had just realized something. Come to think of it, I had spent a lot of time with her, so it was no wonder she could tell what I was thinking. Plus, we had made a promise not to keep things from each other. I whispered into her ear, and Marie's eyes widened for a moment—then, she grinned.

"Hehe, that sounds very fun."

"Oh? You've got a rather mischievous look in your eyes, Miss."

Indeed, I wanted to discover something from this attraction. I wanted to find out whether or not Wridra disliked horror as a genre. In all ages and

countries, horror was a big part of entertainment, and one could've called it a staple. Fear was an instinct that stimulated creatures like none other, which explained why people couldn't help but look at things they found horrifying. Wridra had made a comment before, claiming she was scared of such things. And so, I wanted to expose the truth once and for all.

"Yes, I'm actually a very bad girl. But you're also very bad, aren't you?" Marie said.

"Oh, no, I couldn't hold a candle to you, Ms. Mariabelle." She dug her elbow into my rib, which felt pretty ticklish. We chuckled evilly amongst each other as we looked forward to our little scheme, and Wridra looked at us with a dubious expression.

"What is going on with you two? And are you certain we are going in the right direction for the attraction? The scenery is getting rather desolate around here."

"Yes, I think we're close. Oh, it's starting to drizzle," Marie replied.

"Uh oh. We need to find shelter before it really starts pouring... Oh, there's a good spot right over there."

We started walking faster toward the mansion without waiting for the other two to reply.

"Wait just a minute! What was that little show you put on just now?! I said wait!" Wridra demanded.

"H-Hey! Don't leave me here by myself!" Eve shouted after us. They hurriedly ran after us, and our adventure through the horror attraction had begun. Thunder crackled overhead, illuminating the mansion in a streak of white light. I felt bad for Eve when she yelped in surprise, but we couldn't just stop now.

Once we got inside, we were greeted by a long line, as was typical with most attractions. Wridra and Eve seemed relieved at the presence of others. But the mansion was quite dim inside, and there was a sense of eeriness in the air that was hard to describe.

"Hmm, perhaps I am imagining it, but even the staff members seem to be lacking life."

"Wha... Hey! Don't say scary things like that!"

Indeed, the staff members were all jovial wherever we went, but their expressions and attire were rather subdued here. We must have come at the right time, because we made our way into the back of the room without issues, as if we were being drawn into it. Our group entered along with the other chattering guests, and Wridra's straight black hair swished around as she scanned her surroundings.

"What's wrong, Wridra?"

"Nothing. I see it is just a small room surrounded by walls. Hm, it appears I put my guard up for nothing."

"Put your guard up? Are you not good with these sorts of things, Wridra? You kinda sound like a kid right now." Eve showed off her fangs as she grinned, and Wridra's brows twitched in annoyance, which was a rather

rare sight. She was just about to say something when the sound of the door closing rang throughout the hall, and the two of them froze where they stood. Then, pale, beautiful hands reached out and grasped onto their shoulders.

“E-Eeek!”

They looked to their side in a panic to see Marie there with a dreadful expression. The dim lighting gave her skin a waxen hue, causing Wridra and Eve to gasp.

“Shh, quiet. There’s something strange about this place... Do you feel it? I think... They’re here.”

“What is here?! Use proper nouns, will you?!” Wridra blurted out.

“Yeah! And why are you holding your hand up to your ear like that?! I don’t hear anything!” Eve added. They were getting teary-eyed as they complained, but Marie pressed a finger up to her lips for silence, and they both gulped hard. Just then, an ominous voice began to speak.

It was the voice of the dead.

The voice of those who couldn’t find peace even in death, and who roamed the world of the living to this day.

The voices that spilled out from the land of the dead ran a chill across the spines and necks of the girls from time to time.

The mindset that it was just an attraction was dangerous in itself. There were finely crafted mechanisms built into this room, giving off an air that there was nothing ordinary about it. The pictures along the walls began to change, revealing the story of their bloody history. What horrific disasters had taken place in this mansion? What madness had the residents here lived in? The somber sound of an organ playing could be heard, and the pictures began to unravel their hidden stories as they gradually began to rise.

“I-It is nothing but a trick to fool children... Yes, a trick!” Wridra said.

“I’m not scared, I’m not scared! I’m totally fine!” Eve said.

Creeeak... The door slowly opened.

Would they have been able to say the same thing when it revealed a sight that was completely different from the hallway we had just entered from? What about when they saw the rows of countless chairs in the dim corridor, moving around without making a noise? Cold air flowed into the room, and I whispered to the cowering girls.

“It looks like we missed our chance to flee. That was our last chance...”

“When exactly did we have a chance?! Wheeen?!”

Wridra was still shouting, “Tell me!” as we were forced to walk from the crowd pushing us forward, so it seemed she still had a lot of energy left in her. I was glad to see that. There was still a long way to go for the rest of the attraction, so she would surely have enjoyed it to the end.

Eve seemed to have sensed something in my smile and immediately wrapped her arms around Wridra. It wasn’t my fault. I couldn’t help it. I had come to realize that scaring people was far too much fun. Marie and I chuckled darkly, and the other two embraced each other tightly.

Because we had been fooling around like this, we heard lively shouting from the seat behind us. The chairs we were sitting in moved around on their own, and they were made so they would spin around so we faced them even if we didn't want to. Whoever designed these chairs would probably have been delighted to see them screaming every time it swiveled. But Marie seemed completely unfazed next to me and was rather fascinated by the construction.

"This is amazing. Someone made all of this, right?"

"Oh, you're not scared, Marie? I guess you wouldn't be, considering you see spirits all the time." She smiled, as if to say that I hit the nail on the head. That explained why she got more anxious when cute characters were put in dangerous situations, like at the previous attraction.

And the rides in this mansion were designed not to move too dramatically, considering its broad demographic. Thanks to this, I was able to take this time to intertwine my fingers with hers and feel her soft skin. When translucent ghosts appeared to dance in the air, Marie's eyes lit up with wonder.

"And besides, I'll be fine as long as I'm with you. I actually wasn't scared at all during the fight with Shirley, either. It's strange to think about now."

"That was a real ghost we were dealing with, but she was actually a kind woman at heart. I actually think the zombies that appeared before her were way scarier."

Marie agreed and let out a small giggle, but when her eyes slowly opened, I caught a hint of fear in them. I turned around to find the severed neck of a woman that was too realistic to pass as that of a doll, warning those around it to flee from the mansion.

Aha, so it was a different story when she was dealing with something that *looked* scary. Though, I couldn't complain about the way she was clinging onto me. I had to admit, it was a bit more enjoyable for me with her being at least somewhat scared like this. Such thoughts crossed my mind as I watched her trembling.

After some time, I heard a louder scream from behind, as expected.

Now, after the attraction was over, I was very surprised to find that Wridra looked rather refreshed as she walked down the corridor.

That's odd. According to my plan, she was supposed to be unable to stand from fear, like what happened to Eve. I glanced over to the side to find that Marie had the same puzzled look as me. There was a question mark hovering over her head as she helped me support Eve up on her feet.

"Hm, that was terrifying indeed. It was quite intricately made, and everything seemed very realistic. But I do not mind such things every once in a while. It was actually quite refreshing to get so worked up." Her heels clicked with each step, and she stretched her arms and legs as she spoke. With her long, slender limbs adorned in a gothic-style white shirt and black skirt, even such simple gestures exuded a feminine appeal.

"I see, so it's just like they say, 'Once on shore, we pray no more.'"

"Oh, I kind of understand what you mean. My body feels so light after trembling so much."

"What, so am I the only one who was totally scared to death? Agh... What am I gonna do if the rest of Team Diamond finds out...?" Eve sobbed, but it seemed she was still having trouble standing on her own. She looked like she was about to cry while still clutching on to me and Marie.

"I had somewhat of an idea as to what you were plotting, but I did end up embarrassing myself back there. Very well, I shall tell you the honest truth." Wridra stopped in front of us, then turned around to face us. Backlit by the sunlight, the flared hem of her skirt danced about.

"I do not deal well with enigmatic monsters. Of course, I do not fear the likes of spirits and the dead at all. After all, I have the ability to see things that normal humans cannot see, such as spirits, magic, and magical constructions. But I dislike things that I do not understand, such as those objects that move on their own."

She bared her teeth at us in a child-like gesture. But when I saw that genuine, cute expression, I felt happy, for some reason. But maybe it was thanks to this theme park that brought the child out in everyone that I was able to see that rare look on her face. Finally, Wridra winked and said, "This is a secret between us," and the door to the exit opened. The rainclouds from earlier were all gone, and we were greeted by a bright light.

"Hm, the weather is quite fine. Well then, Kitase, I shall hear your apology."

"Sorry for scaring you, Wridra. You too, Eve. I actually reserved us seats at a restaurant, and I think you'll feel better once you have a nice meal. Is everyone hungry, by the way?" Everyone's faces lit up when I asked the question.

Now that everyone was hungry from expending all that energy, it was time for us to go eat. Of course, it was no ordinary restaurant, but one that was dark, lively, and had cannonballs flying around.

People of my generation probably understood, but opportunities to reserve seats at a restaurant hardly ever presented themselves. Restaurants that were worth getting reservations for tended to be very expensive, relative to the taste of their food, so there was a bit of a barrier of entry for single salarymen. That was why I wanted to be able to make my own delicious food and learned how to cook. There weren't a lot of restaurants located around my house in Aomori in the first place, so I had no choice but to learn how to fend for myself.

Yet, I had made reservations to prepare for today, and here we stood outside of the restaurant. The design of this place somewhat reminded me of the sea. Marie looked around its fancy, western-style decor with great curiosity. The ornaments on the walls and the charming lamps were unbearably attractive for a girl who was into fairy tales.

Though, it was unbearable for my wallet, too. I tried to play it cool, but I felt a weight threatening to flatten me. The ticket to get in was already

expensive enough, and the arrival of our unexpected guest was really putting a dent in my funds.

...Grandpa, I will use the money you gave me with gratitude.

In my heart, I deeply thanked my grandfather in Aomori. These places really were pricey. I would have been in trouble if not for the money my grandpa gave me. But I had to say, I was impressed by the fact that I'd gotten more than my money's worth of enjoyment.

Just then, a menu was placed before me. I raised my head to see a staff member in clean clothes smiling gently at me.

"Your reservation is ready, Mr. Kitase. The reception line is quite busy at the moment, so please take a look at the menu in the meantime."

"Thanks. Pick whatever you like, everyone."

As soon as I said it, the group moved in closer to peer at the menu all at once. The staff member seemed to be slightly taken aback by their conspicuous appearances and the fact that they were speaking Elvish. But I was impressed to find that her amiable smile never wavered. She must have been used to serving foreign customers and dealt with the situation like a professional.

Since Eve was with us this time, I had no choice but to speak in Elvish. Speaking of, Eve's wavy blonde hair swayed as she parted her lips.

"I can't read this Japanese stuff, but... What's all this? How much food are we getting?"

"Just as much as it says here. This is called a 'course meal,' and it's pretty common for fancy western-style food. It starts with the appetizer, then..." Mariabelle happily went on to explain. She had been to a fancy restaurant before, and she was likely the most knowledgeable one out of the residents of the fantasy world when it came to Japan.

"Mm, this roast beef dish seems quite enticing. I have decided on this special menu," Wridra declared.

"That looks good. Yeah, I want that, too!" Eve said. Yup, it was a menu only available during this season. Its contents were quite substantial, and I already knew the price was going to be substantial, too. While I was watching the group getting excited over the food, the staff member from earlier spoke to me in a hushed tone.

"Mr. Kitase, it appears the reservation was made for three..."

"Oh, we had someone join in at the last minute. I'll sit this out, of course, so could you show these girls from out of the country some Japanese hospitality?" As I was talking to the staff member, I felt a tug at my arm. I looked down to find Marie with her eyes wide, looking rather sad.

"No, we can't have you sit out by yourself. I would feel so bad that I couldn't enjoy the meal."

"No, no, nothing would make me happier than having all of you enjoy yourselves. I'm sure you know that better than anyone, Marie." She nodded hesitantly with a troubled expression.

"But I want you to stay with us. You like seeing us having fun, don't you? And look, you could take pictures to commemorate this event." With that, she put the smartphone she had confiscated back into my hand. The sad look on her face as she held onto my sleeve made my heart ache.

Eve was looking at the course menu earlier, but now she was watching our exchange. She was about to say something, but the words didn't leave her lips. Her blue eyes were filled with emotion, but we still hadn't noticed at that point.

"Very well, please wait one moment," the staff member said in a cheery voice. She bowed and walked to the back of the restaurant, and Marie and I blinked. She returned a short while later, then bowed to us, her ponytail wavering as she bowed.

"We have prepared an additional seat for you. Please come right this way, everyone."

Ah, she was already showing us some of that Japanese hospitality I mentioned. No, maybe that could have been said of this whole theme park. The entire staff here was focused on making sure the guests were happy, and I hadn't seen a single one of them slacking off. This place was so pleasant because we could feel their attitude and enthusiasm, allowing us to just focus on having fun. Marie had regained her cheerful expression, holding tightly onto my arm. The damage to my wallet had increased as a result, but I was just happy to see her smile.

It seemed the theme park was full of surprises. This was no ordinary restaurant, and when we walked through the door, complete darkness awaited us. Because we were accustomed to the brightness of the previous room, we stood still at the entrance for a moment.

It seemed they were using very little lighting here. We could hear flowing water beyond the handrails and looked up to see antique-looking lamps hanging there. An old tree with a thick trunk was entangled in the ceiling, and the sight was somewhat frightening. We could hear distant voices of people enjoying attractions, and the group reacted with surprise, as expected.

"Ah, is this actually an attraction?! Look, look, there's a pirate ship's flag over there!"

"Hmm, this is quite the surprise. I did not expect to see humans trying to flee from cannons here." Eve the dark elf's reaction was cute, too, as she looked back and forth between me and the waterfront with a confused expression. I nearly burst out laughing, but I contained myself out of fear of being rude.

We sat down at the table prepared for us and noticed the cleanly set table and fancy-looking chairs in the dim lighting. As we surveyed our surroundings, a staff member came by to calmly set some knives and forks on the table.

"Looks like it. This is my first time here, but it's nice that we get a nice, long look at the attractions from the other side here."

"Oh yes, it's wonderful. The scenery is a little scary, but I feel like I'm having a meal inside of a movie or a picture book," Marie agreed. Everyone smiled and nodded as they experienced the sound of cannon fire and scent of the shore from afar. I felt that making this reservation had been worth it after all.

"So, Eve, have you been enjoying yourself? I was a bit worried after bringing you to a place like this after you just arrived in Japan."

"Hmm, I dunno. But I've been laughing this whole time, so I guess I'm having fun." Eve traced the rim of her cup with a finger as she replied. Maybe there was something still weighing on her, because her expression told me she had mixed feelings. I quietly waited for her to continue, and Eve finally looked up.

"Usually, I don't really laugh much. I was actually surprised to learn what my laughter sounded like since I came here."

"That is odd. You have been laughing this entire time. What a foolish comment, coming from a girl who was petrified with fear earlier," Wridra said.

"Whaaat?! When did I... Oh, sorry." Eve saw Marie holding a finger up to her own lips and apologized earnestly, as if she had just remembered they were in a restaurant. As Eve sat back down into her seat, I turned to her.

"Then, I guess you're having fun so far. In the dream world— I mean, are you not having fun living in Arilai?"

"Living over there isn't about having fun. It's all about training and doing drills and taking care of the manor, so it's hard to even get myself some time to sleep. Team Diamond is full of elites, and I'm the least skilled one. I don't have time for fun."

I couldn't find the words to reply. To be honest, my life was pretty much the exact opposite. The dream world was an extension of my play time, and I could easily say that I'd enjoyed myself even after a fierce battle. If I woke up in Japan again, I could read a book, take a walk, or have some delicious food and go on with the rest of my day as I pleased. Though, I did have a duty to go to work. I explained as such to Eve, and she laid her face flat on the table.

"You cleared the second floor living like *that*?! Ahhh... That just killed all my motivation. Besides, I was killed by Lord Zarish over there anyway. It's so over for me."

"That's what I don't understand. What did you see in that man?" Marie asked. Eve stared back at Marie with her blue eyes. Her eyes seemed like those of a pouting child, and she murmured in response.

"I like his face. Oh, and I liked him better when he used to be nice to me."

Ahh... So she likes the handsome ones... We thought as we looked off into the distance. I really wasn't sure what to say. As for Eve, she sat there with her fingers spread wide as if she was thinking about the ring that was now gone.

"But I'm glad my feelings haven't changed, even without my ring," she continued. "I wasn't sure what would happen when it was removed, but I'm kinda relieved now. I dunno about the others, but at least I know my feelings were real."

That was an interesting comment. The way she'd phrased that just now had me wondering if Zarish's ring had some sort of mind control effect. I did recall that Zarish and the ladies he was with wore rings that were part of a pair. There was a chance he'd used that item to manipulate them.

As I considered this, the food was brought over to our table. The appetizers were lined up in order on the table before us, and the group let out a collective, happy "Wow..." A bottle of red wine to complement it would have been nice, but alcohol wasn't allowed in the land of dreams and magic.

The appetizer was made with in-season ingredients, and even Eve was taken out of her gloomy mood as her eyes widened at the vivid dishes laid out for us. Then, each of us raised our glasses and gave a toast to our guest.

"Anyway, now that you're here with us, it'd be great if you could enjoy what Japan has to offer. Now, let's make the most out of our day at Grimland."

"Yaaaaaay!"

Oh, it seemed Eve was learning how to have fun, too. Our glasses clinked together, and Eve looked rather joyful as our lunch began.

Now, the seasonal special menu was not composed of things one would see in an average home-cooked meal. The presentation was designed with the motif of a pirate ship in mind, with vivid and unique dishes like seafood contained in a semi-transparent jelly.

I took a bite and was surprised to find a burst of umami filling my mouth as I enjoyed the juicy texture. The food dissolved in my mouth before I'd even started chewing, and I savored the flavor until the moment I swallowed.

"Mm! What's this? It's good, even though it looks so weird!" Eve exclaimed.

"Weird...? I think it's so pretty that it's almost a shame to eat it," Marie replied. They seemed to be in control so far, but then the main dish came out: roast beef topped with lobster. As soon as the group saw its luxurious splendor, they all let out a fascinated "Wow!" The roast beef had been kept at just the right temperature, and the knife sliced through it with ease. The flavor of the full-bodied gravy sauce filled our mouths with each bite.

"So tender! Mm! It's sweet and tasty!" Eve said.

"Mmmm, the meat is so sweet! This is why I love meat in Japan!" Marie declared. Marie and Wridra were full of smiles as they cried out, their feet marching in place on the floor as they chewed. It seemed that Wridra really liked beef, and she happily groaned with wrinkles between her brows. She seemed to have taken a liking to it, and smiled while looking directly at me. The appetizing, pink-colored roast beef didn't exist in the other world, and this was a dish in which one could fully savor the taste of the meat.

"Hmm, I must say. They have done quite well in making guests want to return by associating good food with the experience. Walking around here for some time made me realize just how cleverly constructed this place is," Wridra noted.

"Yeah, you might be right. There wasn't really anything around in Aomori where I grew up, but I think it's the food that makes me want to keep going back." Marie raised her hand in objection, then swallowed the food in her mouth before speaking.

"As far as I know, Aomori is the best of Japan. Your grandfather's dishes were amazing, of course, but there were other things there that were so enjoyable. The lush greenery and cherry blossoms in full bloom were so beautiful. The people who passed by were all very kind, too."

"Indeed, those hot springs were particularly great. The sensation of soaking in the water in that peaceful atmosphere... It has been some time since I have gone to hot springs, so I have been itching to go again," Wridra said. She and Marie agreed with each other and laughed out loud, while Eve watched them curiously.

"Hm? What is it, Eve?"

"Oh, nothing... I just thought it was pretty amazing. I don't really know what they're talking about, but they're always having so much fun, unlike us."

"But I think it's a shame not to enjoy life. You only get one shot, after all."

I didn't think much of it as I said it, but Eve seemed moved by the words. I'd heard that elves could sometimes lose significance in their life due to their long life spans. Maybe all that time she had dedicated to Zarish had drained all of the joy out of her life, too. Eve was at a loss for words for some time, then took a sip of water to calm herself. Then, she spoke.

"...You tried to give up your seat when we came in here, didn't you?" With that, Eve tore off a piece of bread and tossed it into her mouth. She made a cute face as if to say, "Oh, there's cheese in it! This is tasty!" Then, she cleared her throat and spoke again. "It made me feel like such a nuisance, and I had mixed feelings about it at first, but... Um, I mean, that's just the kind of person you are, right?"

She was speaking in rather abstract terms, so I could only cock my head to the side in response. Eve desperately tried to find the right words, then seemed to get a flash of inspiration and directed her blue eyes at me again.

"I think Team Amethyst's leader is wonderful. I feel at peace near you, Kazuhiho, and I admire the way you live... Heh, sorry about stealing your jewel that one time." Her tongue peeked out of her mouth as she showed me a smile that was totally different from the expression she'd had on when we'd first met. I felt like there was always a precarious air about her, but I could finally stop worrying.

"Well, it's nice to have you with us. By the way, my real name is Kazuhiro, not Kazuhiho," I told her.

"Hm, Eve is just my nickname, too. If you don't mind that it's a bit long, you can call me Evelyn." It seemed we had just become a little bit closer. Some sweet dessert was brought to us, as if in celebration, sprucing up the table even further.

You know, making a dark elf friend at an amusement park every once in a while was actually pretty nice. Though, this was the land of dreams and magic, so maybe it wasn't so out of the ordinary.

"So, shall we head to the next attraction?"

"Sure, where are we going next?" Marie asked, wiping her mouth with a napkin. I pointed beyond the handrails. Ahead, we saw cannons firing and crowds cheering in the distance, and her pale purple eyes lit up with joy.

§

It was dark as night, and there was a lively clamor all around us. The crowd of people was different from that of the heart of the city, perhaps because it was filled with families and couples. Everyone was smiling brightly.

The boat boarding area came into view after we had stood in line for a while, and Marie moved her lips closer to my ear. It felt ticklish as she whispered, "A pirate!" in a giddy tone.

I looked over to where she was pointing and saw that there was indeed a staff member dressed like a pirate. The indoor facility was only lit with the bare minimum of lights, and the employee guided the guests carefully so they wouldn't trip on anything.

This was a pirate theme park. It wasn't too familiar of a theme for Japanese people, but they existed even to this day in the fantasy world. So, I decided to whisper right back into Marie's ear.

"Oh no, they might be here to kidnap you." Marie tried her best to hold in her reaction, but it came out in the form of a stifled laugh. She was usually quite reserved, but the joyful mood of the theme park seemed to have affected her.

I turned around to find Wridra the Arkdragon and Eve the dark elf both seeming to enjoy themselves as they walked over the creaky floorboards of the dock. Wridra looked like a model, with her tall form and straight, black hair. Our eyes met, and she smiled as she spoke to me.

"The music is quite jovial. Everywhere we go is filled with such a jaunty tune."

"You're right about that. Come to think of it, Wridra, you seem to enjoy songs. Do you have an interest in music?" She looked up to the night sky contemplatively, then nodded.

"Hah, hah, it appears so. This also goes for clothing, but I have lived without making new discoveries for a long time. But Japan is so full of the unknown." She was talking about something beyond human understanding, but her smile was surprisingly gentle and attractive. Well, it looked like it was time for her to experience the world of pirates.

A small boat approached the pier with a creak, and the rope that had been blocking our path was removed. We boarded the boat, as instructed by a staff member, and the sound of water splashing could be heard. Marie sat next to me, happily holding on to the handrail as her pale purple eyes looked up at me.

"I've only read about pirates in books. They're supposedly savage and terrifying, and they steal things like treasures."

"I haven't really been out to sea much, now that I think about it," I replied. "What about you, Marie? Have you been to the sea?"

"Unfortunately, I haven't. I was always in the forest, after all," Marie replied.

Just then, the boat began to move, along with the ring of a bell. We waved goodbye to the employees, and our vessel began rowing forward into the dark sea. I felt a tug at my sleeve and saw Marie was pointing at the restaurant we were just at earlier.

"It really is one of the attractions now that I look at it from here."

"We probably wouldn't have noticed if we hadn't eaten there. Mm, there are so many clever details everywhere." I agreed completely. It really showed that the port town before us was made with the combined efforts of many adults, and the view was reminiscent of the Age of Discovery. It felt nostalgic somehow. A haunting tone reverberated from an instrument as the scent of the sea sent a shiver down Marie's spine.

Now, we were entering pirate territory up ahead. There was no turning back at this point. Just as we realized we were on a one-way course, the boat suddenly felt as if it was floating in the air.

"Nyaaaaaa!"

The darkness caught Marie off guard, and she let out a cute scream. Waves broke against the boat, and Marie looked at me with a wide-eyed stare, her heart beating furiously. I decided to teach her a bit about this world while she was still in her surprised state.

"So, there are supposedly all sorts of different pirates. Have you ever heard a fairytale about pirates that never die?"

"N-No, I haven't. And I don't want to," Marie replied. Well, we had come all this way. Since we couldn't turn back anyway, there was nothing to lose from hearing me out.

I told her as such and pointed out someone who had been reduced to just their skeleton. The skeleton had obtained some treasure, and it stared at us with its hollow eye sockets. Marie gasped. There were tears welling up in her eyes, but she bravely held on and slapped my pointing finger away.

"None of that! I'm scared enough as it is! You just sit tight and don't do anything!" She fell onto me with a thud and embraced me, wrapping her arms around under my arms, and I let out an "*Oof*" in response. This was apparently just the right position for her, and she let out a satisfied puff of air out of her nose.

Well, we were in the dark, after all, so I figured it would've been nice to snuggle up as we watched the attraction this time. I lightly tapped her shoulder as a sign of surrender, and she let out another satisfied sigh. It was a bit cold being out in the water, but I was nice and cozy like this.

Now, it seemed the undead pirates were still living in their own way. Even reduced to skeletons, they continued to betray, steal, and drink, despite being unable to get drunk. There was cheerful music playing, but I could feel Marie's heart beating intensely, with her body pressed against me from the laughter echoing all around us. I felt a bit guilty about scaring her so much, so I held her shoulder and whispered to her.

"I still don't understand much about the undead, but maybe the second floor of the labyrinth would've been more lively and fun if they were as expressive as these guys."

"Oh, then they probably would have tried to have a friendly chat with us. I don't know if I could have attacked them then. I think the priests would have been out of business, too."

The skeletons did look frightening, but it seemed Marie thought they were nothing to be scared of, compared to the monsters on the second floor that had attacked us without question. Her heartbeat quieted down right away, and her arms wrapped around me loosened their hold a bit.

The pirates seemed to have their own story, too. There was a military ship chasing after them, and we had wandered in as they exchanged cannon fire over the vast expanse of sea.

"Oh, wow! They're using long-ranged attacks across the sea! I didn't realize battles would be so focused on physical attacks in a world without magical assistance." Pillars of water shot up with loud splashes, and Marie looked around with great interest.

I was strangely impressed to find that Marie would see things that way from her point of view. She already had the baseline knowledge about the topic from when we saw the firearms and cannons on display during our visit to a castle some time back.

"It is logical, but transportation and management must have been quite tedious," Wridra's voice noted from behind us.

It was a strange world of the dead, but perhaps these ladies that had come from a fantasy world were strange in their own way. The jolly bunch waved goodbye to Marie, and we parted ways for now.

By the time we left the ride, the sun was already setting. There was a hint of indigo mixed in the sky, and stars could be seen on the far side of the sky. I let out a sigh as I watched the view.

After all that planning with Kaoruko to go around the park efficiently, we ended up spending most of the time walking around and talking. We first started talking about the design of the hedges and fences, then got sidetracked staring at everything lining the streets, so we really couldn't help it. But not only were the girls not bored, they spread their arms wide and went on about how fun it was, so I got the sense that I did all right.

"Mmf, that cannon fight was quite intense!" Wridra said.

"Yes, it was everything that makes an attraction so entertaining. I really felt like I was inside the story," Marie agreed. The two conversed passionately about the stage and events, and I nearly uttered a comment about them being more interesting than the shows themselves.

I looked over to the side to see Eve standing there, watching me with her blue eyes that had the unyielding look of a cat.

"Hey, it's getting pretty dark. Are we leaving soon?" she asked.

"In a bit. But something fun is coming up soon. Notice how everyone is going in the same direction as us?" Eve's wavy blonde hair swayed as she looked around curiously, and she noticed everyone walking with a look full of excited anticipation.

"Huh, is there an event coming up? Is this gonna blow me away, too?"

"Hmm, all I can say is, I guarantee you won't forget it for quite some time," I replied. This seemed to pique her interest considerably, and she laughed loudly, which was a rather rare sight. It seemed I really liked how she looked when she laughed with her mouth wide open like that.

"Sounds good," she said. "I didn't really understand this 'Japan' place at first... Wait, I guess I still don't. Anyway, I really like this place. You never know what's gonna happen next."

I wasn't sure if this place was necessarily representative of Japan as a whole, but I was glad she enjoyed it regardless. But if we were to visit the land of dreams and magic regularly, my wallet would've perished before long. As I considered this, I encountered another temptation.

"By the way, I smell something sweet and tasty over there. Think you can show me what kinda man you are, Kazuhiro?" Eve chuckled as she pointed ahead of us. Apparently, food stalls these days didn't only entice kids with the scent of honey, but dark elves, too. It was hard for me to refuse when she was emitting an aura that screamed, "*I wanna eat!*" I at least wanted to put up some fight by asking something that had been on my mind since we'd left the house this morning.

"Okay, but in exchange, I want you to tell me your class, Eve." Her blue eyes widened, and then she smiled and raised her pointer finger. She placed her other hand over the one with the finger outstretched, and my eyes bulged open in response.

"Whaaa? Wait, you're a nin...?!"

"Hehe... Well, then, tell the shopkeep in Japanese for me. I'll take a size large."

My surprise was quickly followed by another as Eve grabbed my wrist and began walking. Her well-trained hands felt a bit rough, and she flashed me a smile, as if to say, "You'd better keep your promise." Hmm, it seemed this girl wasn't quite what I expected. At least, I sure didn't expect a dark elf ninja.

The girls ate their snacks and talked eagerly among each other as we continued walking. There were people all around us, the entire crowd walking toward the big castle ahead.

Indeed, the grand finale in which we woke up from the dream was about to begin.

§

The weather was rather nice for being in the middle of the rainy season, and it was actually pretty hot during the day. Even so, the temperature was much easier to handle after the sun went down, and the heat of the crowd wasn't so bad with the faint breeze blowing.

The stars were faintly visible in the night sky, and we each sat on the stairs or hand rails as we waited for the show to start. Up ahead, the castle that we saw upon entering the theme park was illuminated.

Marie stared at the western-style castle that looked like it came straight out of a picture book, never seeming to tire of the view. There was a bit of a forlornness to her expression, though she also appeared to be anticipating the show to come, as well.

Unfortunately, time moved faster when one was having fun. Maybe in that moment, it wasn't a human like me, but an elf or a dragon who was understanding why time was so valuable.

"It all went by so quickly. It was one surprise after another, and I feel like I've been screaming all day," Marie uttered.

"You really were shouting with a lot of energy. I felt lucky I was able to see that side of you, though," I replied. And... Marie narrowed her eyes at me with a glare.

We were sitting on the staircase, so there was less of a height difference between us than usual. Marie took advantage of this and pinched both of my cheeks. I let out an awkward sound, and then she moved her face in so close that our noses nearly touched... and my heart let out a loud *thump*.

"I know five ways to make you scream. Shall I tell you the first?" Marie asked.

"No, no, I would pwefer not to," I said with my cheeks still being tugged by her fingers. Wait, did she have four other methods besides pinching me? It was a bluff... It had to be... Though, I didn't know what I would've done if it were true, so I decided to keep my mouth shut. I apologized in a hushed tone, then she nodded and released her hold.

We then leaned our shoulders against one another again, drank some juice, and talked about sorcery that had been popular recently as we watched the castle with a blue roof. When the needle of its clock pointed straight up, we would awaken from this land of dreams and magic. The thought introduced a bit of loneliness into the joy I was feeling. Maybe Marie was feeling the same, because I felt her place her head onto my shoulder. She then opened her mouth to speak from right beside me.

"What a wonderful castle. You know how castles usually tend to be intimidating? They're used to defeat enemies, so there isn't much that can

be done about that. But..." I followed her gaze up to the castle and understood what she was trying to say. I could tell there wasn't a hint of an intimidating aura about it, and that it was made purely to bring people joy. In that sense, that castle was like a symbol of the entire theme park itself.

"When I first saw it, I thought about how I wished I could live there. But its role is to bring happiness to people, so I was wrong to think that. Though, maybe one day, I'll be able to use stone spirits to make the same thing."

"Yeah, that's a nice dream to strive for. Then, I'll have to help you level up so you can make it happen," I told her. Marie smiled. Just then, I noticed how strange it was that the hint of loneliness in her expression earlier was now gone. I felt her hold my hand in the dark and realized why.

"I had so much fun today. Let's do something else tomorrow and have more fun together."

There was my answer. Even when the magic of this place expired, we could go play in our own dream world. Knowing that I could enjoy adventures through unknown lands alongside Marie, I was certain that I would go home tonight still feeling excited.

"Then, how would you like to go to the sea in the summer?" I asked her.

"Good idea! A really pretty sea would be nice!" Her smile was so radiant that I could visualize the blue sea behind her. After we cleared the second floor, I'd heard that Arilai was granting us some vacation time, so maybe this was a good time to lead Ms. Elf to another country.

I pictured Marie in a swimsuit and thought, "I sure am glad I have long-distance movement skills." I actually already secured a summer paradise for a destination. It was nice that I liked to travel as a hobby at times like these, since I always knew places to take people on adventures.

Just then, some grand music began to play, and the awaiting crowd let out a cheer. I helped Marie up by her hand, and a single firework shot up and illuminated the night sky.

"Ooooooh! What was that, what was that?! So cool!" she exclaimed. I wasn't really sure how to explain fireworks that were modified in Japan. The castle was lit up in a rainbow of colors, with characters from fairy tales being displayed with lights and music.

"Wow..." she said in amazement. "There's no magic here in Japan, but maybe this is like this world's own kind of magic." It must have been quite a fantastical sight for the ladies that weren't used to modern technology. Marie's eyes widened at the torrent of light that couldn't be reproduced with illusion magic and the sight of the characters being displayed upon the castle.

"Oh! I know that character from that animation! What? How? How are they doing that?!"

"Hmm, this is really impressive. I didn't expect their production value to be so high." This further reinforced the fact that Aomori's amusement parks

stood no chance against this place. It probably wouldn't have even had the will to compete at this point, and I couldn't help but feel sympathy.

I looked to the side and saw that various characters had appeared, along with lively music and singing, and Marie cheered along with the crowd going wild. Her amethyst eyes lit up with joy as she squeezed my hand.

Maybe the theme park was a far better place than I had imagined. Being born in Aomori, it was my first time actually visiting one. Seeing Marie so giddy, all I could feel was satisfaction from having come here.

The music, stories, dreams, and magic were finally coming to an end. The characters were displayed one after another, as if to say goodbye, and fireworks shot into the night sky along with the grand music. Light scattered in the air, seeming to smother the heavens, and Marie, Wridra, and Eve raised their voices.

"Yeeeah! Grimland is the best!"

They seemed to be overcome with emotion as they raised their hands in the air, having enjoyed the theme park to the fullest. Then, everyone clapped as if to show gratitude for the day full of fun and happiness. Seeing how even the residents of the fantasy world were so moved, it really made me appreciate modern entertainment.

We then held each other's hands and talked about everything that had happened today as we left the world of dreams and magic behind.

§

As I drove along the night road with the steering wheel in hand, I realized just how quiet it was.

I glanced to the side to see Marie was asleep, still wearing the animal ear headband we got from the souvenir shop. I turned around and saw Wridra had her eyes closed in the back seat. Her matching headband made her look like she was Marie's sister, which I found to be pretty cute.

They really must have tired themselves out today, because Marie only mumbled something in her sleep even when I put a blanket over her lap at a red light. The view outside my car window was pitch black, and the streets were quite empty at this late hour. The light turned green. I drove past an intersection, then another, then I couldn't help but utter a comment to no one in particular.

"So, what do I do about him now...?"

"By 'him,' do you mean Zarish?" A voice replied from the back seat. I was taken aback a bit. I totally thought Eve had fallen asleep, but the dark elf ninja had me fooled.

"Oh, I didn't know you were awake. I guess ninjas are hard to read, after all."

Our eyes met in the rear view mirror. If we'd only just met now, she probably would have choked me then and there. The dubious look in her eyes still hadn't changed. Eve slowly rose and leaned on the back of the driver's seat, bringing her face closer to mine.

"So, what are you gonna do?" she asked.

"Ah..." I glanced behind me, but Wridra was still fast asleep. In her case, I really couldn't tell if she was sleeping. Though, I couldn't ever figure out what the Arkdragon had in mind anyway, so I gave up on trying.

I gradually slowed the car down and brought it to a stop in front of a small park.

"Um... Where are we?" Eve asked.

"Just a park. Eve, how would you like to drink something sweet with me?" She nodded without hesitation in response.

We had gone a bit off of the main street, so it became completely silent when I turned the engine off.

The vending machine at the side of the park provided a small pocket of light around it, giving it the impression of being in its own little dimension. The cool night breeze gently blew as I approached the vending machine, and Eve looked at it with great curiosity.

"You just put money into it and press the button, and then a drink comes out," I explained.

"Whoa, really? That's crazy!" She bent over with her butt facing me in clothing that revealed her long, slender legs and thighs. I wished she would be a little more aware of these things as a woman. I just hoped she was only like this in front of people she trusted. Such protective thoughts ran through my head as I popped some change into the machine, and the buttons lit up at once.

"Oooh, shiny. Hey, hey, I can buy anything I want?"

"Of course. That's why I invited you, after all. There's your traditional coffee, and these cold drinks are popular, too," I told her. I couldn't really tell if she was listening. Eve groaned as she deliberated over her options in front of the vending machine, her finger hovering around indecisively. Her somewhat tight hoodie and short shorts accentuated the lines of her healthy, tanned body, and my eyes couldn't help but look...

"Oh, wait!" I called out.

"Huh?" I noticed she was about to press one of the buttons and tried to stop her, but I couldn't warn her in time. The machine let out a beep, and then a warm can of oshiruko came down into the port below. I mean, it wasn't a big problem or anything, but the sweet azuki bean porridge served with mochi was a Japanese-style drink with a distinctive sweetness to it, and I wasn't sure if it would fit her palate, being a newcomer to Japan.

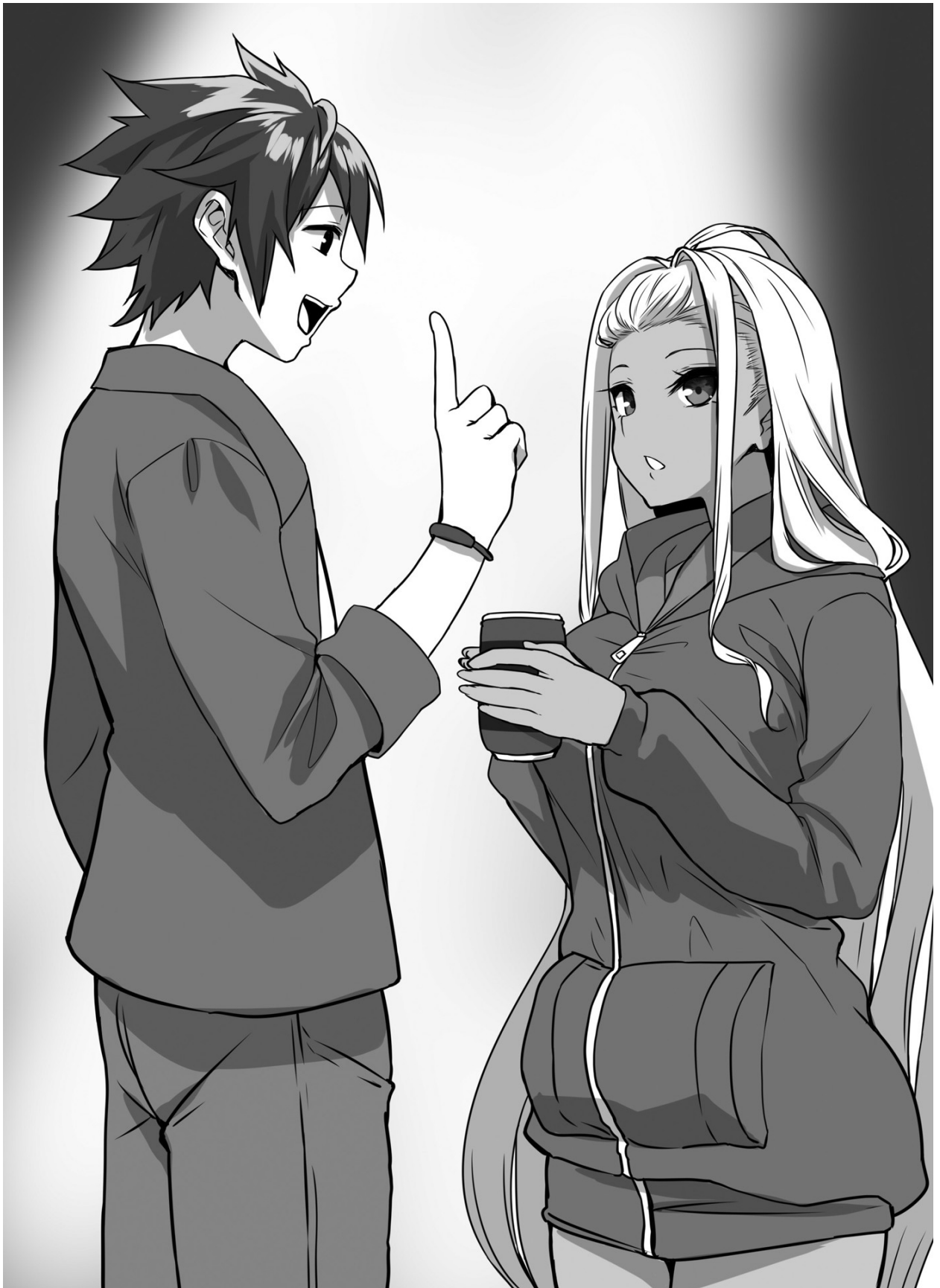
Eve picked the can out of the port and looked surprised by its warmth. Her blue eyes stared at the can for a moment, and then she turned to me with a cheerful expression.

"This looks good! Sorry, did I take the one you wanted, Kazuhiro?"

"...No, no, enjoy," I said. I beckoned her over with my finger, then pulled the can open by the tab and started walking through the night park. The park in the suburb was rather big. Supposedly, people often took short walks there during the day. Maybe that was why it was so quiet, and the

lighting was rather sparse. Eve took a sip of the warm oshiruko as she walked with me, and her eyes shot open.

“This is tasty! What are the little lumpy things in there?” Her tongue ran over her plump lips, and she actually seemed satisfied with it. But then it made sense. Sweet food was very rare in the desert country she came from, so she was probably fine with most sweets.



Eve continued to take little sips from her can and looked over at me, the motion causing her blonde, wavy hair to waver. There seemed to be a hint of fear in her expression.

"You still can't forgive Lord Zarish?" she asked.

"...No, I can't." I considered myself to have a rather mild-mannered personality. Confessing such a hateful sentiment did give me pause, but it did feel satisfying to get it out. It seemed that I'd been harboring resentment for Zarish. Eve wasn't upset at my response, but she did look at me with a hint of sadness.

"Why? Because he attacked you?"

"No, that's not it," I replied. "I can't tell you how many times I've been attacked and looted before. I don't hate people just for that."

Rather, if I hated everyone who attacked me, I wouldn't have been able to enjoy my time in the dream world. So whenever I went back to sleep, I always forgot about my attackers completely. But this time was totally different.

"He pointed his sword at you. Which means that if he ever got Mariabelle in his party, he could do the same thing to her."

"..."

If it was just about me, I wouldn't have resented him. The issue was that he could do something awful to Marie. I couldn't stop the emotions from boiling up inside me. When Wridra told me, "I am relieved to see there is at least some resentment for him inside you," it must have been because she saw through all this.

When I'd finished explaining myself, Eve bit her lower lip. I couldn't find the words for the girl who still cared for the man who had almost killed her. The only solutions that came to mind were cruel ones, and Eve and I were no longer enemies after spending the day together.

Sensing her pain, I began to think of solutions that didn't involve cruelty. Could this have been resolved without fighting? Was there a way to prevent him from acting inhumane? No, I still had no answers. I knew nothing about him. Eve was the only one who did.

I gave her my honest thoughts on the matter, but she gave no response. I looked at her as she stayed silent and saw that she was facing her palm toward the night sky. Maybe she was looking at the spot where her ring used to be.

"...I couldn't say this before when I had the ring on, but I'll say it now. I want to stop Lord Zarish. After all, he's crossing a very dangerous bridge right now, and no one can stop him anymore."

"Dangerous bridge?"

"Yeah. Sorry... I still can't tell anyone." Her tongue peeked out from between her lips as she gave me an apologetic look. Sweat glistened on her dark skin, and the tension in her expression told me she was being sincere. "Kazuhiro, can I make a suggestion?"

"Yeah, please do," I said right away. I was dealing with a monster that had a 60-level advantage on me. I had absolutely no answers this time around, so any ideas were welcome.

"I have only one suggestion. Take away all of his rings. Then you might be able to do something about him," she told me under a sky full of stars. As I waited for her to finish her oshiruko, I quietly replayed in my mind the words she had told me with a serious expression I'd never seen on her before.

Eve handed me the empty can, and I let out a sigh. Summer was soon upon us. In the humid heat, I looked up at the night sky with my usual sleepy-looking expression. But in my mind, I was desperately trying to give shape to a solution that was so nebulous up until just recently. I needed to think of the safest and easiest plan possible that wouldn't leave a bad taste in my mouth.

I continued thinking for some time, then spoke to Eve as she sat down on the swing next to me.

"We really scared you and Wridra with those attractions today, huh?"

"Uuu... Yeah. But why do you hafta bring that up now?"

Eve wrinkled her brows at the sudden mention of the topic. I then raised my pointer finger and proposed an idea.

"I was thinking of doing the same thing to Zarish. What do you think? Today, I found out it's actually pretty fun scaring people. I want you to know what it's like, too." In other words, it was an idea of betrayal. Or maybe it could have been considered an agreement that would have benefited both of us.

My opponent was 60 levels higher than me and protected by seven elite fighters of Team Diamond. Thinking about it normally, there was no way I would have been able to take him head on and win. But now that I had someone with insider info on my side, I wanted to know what would happen if we delivered a blow he didn't expect at all. The script Zarish kept close to his heart would've likely needed a sudden and dramatic rewrite.

Evelyn the ninja probably had no idea she would be roped into an idea to take down a giant. And in a battle that would draw as little blood as possible, too.

The trees rustled in the wind overhead, and Eve remained motionless for quite some time.

§

I opened the car door while taking care to make as little noise as possible. The calmness I felt in the air was perhaps due to me being used to living there. The wind that caressed my cheek was somewhat warm, and I felt like the long rainy season would soon come to an end. Then, summer would officially arrive in Tokyo.

By the time I got back to the parking area, the lights shining through the condo windows had mostly gone out. I opened the passenger's side seat to find Marie peacefully sleeping there, and my mouth formed a small smile.

She looked so comfortable in her slumber; I felt the urge to just watch her for a while. Careful not to awaken her, I placed my hand on her back and under her thigh, feeling her warmth as I lifted her body.

"And up we go... You're still as light as a feather." I made sure she didn't hit her head and held her against my chest, and then Marie stirred and snuggled up to my neck. I got a whiff of her sweet, feminine scent, and the soft sensation pressing against me got me a little flustered.

Wait, this reaction...

"Who's this little Ms. Elf pretending to be asleep?"

Marie giggled as soon as I said it, then opened her sleepy eyes right in front of me. It seemed she was still halfway in dreamland. She let out a big yawn, then closed her eyes again. She rubbed her cheek against me as if to tell me, "Just carry me back to the room," and I was happy to oblige.

Supporting her body that was even lighter than it appeared, I enjoyed her warmth against me as I closed the door with my butt. The condo was right ahead, so I decided to get into the elevator to head up to our floor. The other two ladies followed me in.

"Nn, we certainly had our fill of fun today. I can still hear music playing in my head," Wridra said.

"I totally hear it, too. The music's one thing, but I still feel that floaty sensation when I walk," Eve added. We were in the land of dreams and magic until just recently, so I understood how they felt. I could see white hair that was like down feathers in the corner of my vision, with the black-haired beauty Wridra and Eve reflecting on the day.

The small space within the elevator still maintained the signature high humidity of the rainy season. I let out a sigh, then decided to throw some fuel into their excited discussion.

"Just so you know, we've only experienced about twenty percent of that theme park."

"No way!"

They had been expanding the theme park over many years. It wasn't impossible, but not very likely that we would get around to everything in a single day. This topic was enough to spur on the conversation further, and Marie furrowed her brows in reaction to their noisy chatter. But she was pretending to be asleep, so she was just going to have to let it slide.

We returned to my bedroom, and I slowly lowered Marie onto the bed. Her face looked rather relaxed, so maybe she found it comfortable to be carried over here automatically.

I took her socks off and placed a blanket over her, and her expression relaxed even further. For some reason, seeing her smile filled me with a sense of happiness. I considered how her expression somewhat reminded me of a cat, then noticed the dark elf looking around the room curiously.

"Huh, it's nice how it lights up right away like that. Is this normal in Japan?"

"Oh, you mean the lights. Yeah, it's like that in any household, but there's no magic or spirits... Wait, actually, Wridra and Marie are an exception."

As I said this, Wridra flashed a peace sign from the chair next to the table she had been sitting in, as if to say, "Of course."

"Hmm. I don't really get it, but does that mean I'm the strongest here, since I'm a physical enhancement type?" She flashed a defiant smile, which may have been because she felt that Wridra outclassed her under normal circumstances. But this didn't even qualify as a taunt when dealing with the dragon.

"Fool, spirits are the source of your powers. Have you still not realized their voices do not reach you?" Wridra pointed out.

"Huh?! A-Ah, you're right! I can't tell what the spirits are saying!"

Wridra rolled her eyes, then pointed at the elf girl sleeping on the bed with her arms outstretched.

"If you become as proficient in Japanese as Marie there, you will be able to handle the spirits of this land. Do better yourself, if you ever feel so inclined."

I overheard the conversation between the ladies, but started preparing the bath without pointing out that it could have taken at least three years for Eve to learn Japanese. My body felt heavy from all that walking we did at the theme park. I hadn't really noticed when we were there, but the fatigue set in as soon as I had returned home. Considering the fact that my hobby was sleeping despite being a working adult, I couldn't deny I was a bit lacking when it came to vitality. I started filling the bathtub with hot water and returned back to my room.

"Boy, I feel like I've become a lot healthier since you all came here," I said aloud.

"You would be more convincing if you said such things with a more alert expression," Wridra pointed out right away.

I couldn't really do anything about my face, since I was born with it, but I really was sleepy, so her feedback was spot-on.

I looked to the side to find Marie still asleep, and I felt the alluring sight beckoning to me. *Ahh, it would be so comfortable if I dove under those blankets right now...*

"But first, we need to eat something. And it would be a good idea to take a bath before going back over there... Actually, I guess this is Eve's first time, so she wouldn't know how to use the bathroom. Wridra, would you mind teaching her?"

Wridra smiled in response and flashed an "OK" sign with her hand. So, I decided to prepare the meal in the meantime. I debated whether or not to wake up Marie, but we'd be taking turns for the bath, and I still had to cook. She would probably have ended up waking up on her own anyway, so I decided against it.

Just then, Eve peered in from the edge of my vision. Her blonde, wavy hair swayed as she looked with her blue eyes full of cat-like curiosity.

"Hey, what's this 'bath' thing you're talking about? Is it tasty?" she asked.

"No, no, it's not something you eat. It's a place where you wash your body. You'll get some tasty food after you're done with the bath."

I asked her to excuse me and touched her golden hair, then grabbed the cover over her long ears. It made a fizzling noise, and Wridra's magic particles were reduced to their original, wiry form.

"Thanks. Nn, it feels so freeing to have my ears out in the open again. Oh, can I take my socks off? Also, it'd be awesome if I could walk around barefoot without getting yelled at."

"Go right ahead. Now that I think of it, you always had shoes on on the other side, huh? I don't know if I could relax wearing shoes indoors."

Speaking of which, Marie had been wearing her bunny ear slippers for a long time now. It seemed that elves didn't like wearing heavy clothing and preferred a more natural state. Since dark elves were closely related to elves, maybe Eve enjoyed being barefoot or wearing slippers.

"Feel free to make yourself at home. You should also learn about the culture of baths. It's refreshing and really melts your fatigue away, so take your time in there."

"Man, your house is full of fun stuff, isn't it? Let's go already, Wridra," Eve said.

"The tub is not full yet, but... Hm, perhaps I will teach you how to wash yourself in the meantime." Then the two headed for the dressing area. Maybe Eve was excited by the unfamiliar sights of the bathroom and the mirror in the dressing area, but her reaction was somewhat loud.

"Huh? Wha, what? Why's water coming out of there like that? Why? How? I thought we were gonna scoop some water with a bucket!"

"The hot water flows through this thin pipe. Ah, you spent your time in the desert country, so you must not be familiar with the culture of water baths," Wridra replied.

"Is it like a steam bath? Well, the manor belonged to Lord Zarish, so I didn't really get to use it. I just scrubbed my body with a wet cloth."

It seemed the select few, like aristocrats, enjoyed using saunas. Eve's tone was lighthearted as she spoke, but there was a hint of sadness to what she described, so I couldn't help but pay attention. So I decided to put off the cooking preparation a little bit and knocked on the open door. But I had no idea Eve had already begun undressing, and was slightly flustered to find her tanned skin exposed to her shoulders.

"H-Hey there... In Japan, there's a culture of drinking beer when you get out of the bath, and... Wait, maybe this is a universal thing? Anyway. Would you like some when you're done with your bath?"

"Yes, I would! That sounds like a wonderful culture, so you should be sure to honor it, Kazuhiho!" She reached over and slapped my shoulder

jovially a couple times. Her body may have been concealed by the door, but she really should have been more cautious about making her breasts bounce like that. Wridra could have given Eve a run for her money in terms of not being cautious about such things, and the Arkdragon's voice reverberated from the bathroom.

"Hah, hah, the beer from this country is in a class of its own. Perhaps it is because their water is pure, but it cannot be compared with anything you have ever consumed. Beware not to collapse to the ground from shock."

Eve laughed aloud at Wridra's warning, then waved me goodbye and disappeared into the dressing area. I stood where I was and let out a sigh.

I closed the door for the two ladies that had no sense of self-preservation, then returned to the kitchen.

It was Eve's first day in Japan, but she gave off somewhat of a little sister vibe to me. She made me anxious, with me watching her as she just laughed things off without understanding my concern. I was an only child, but maybe this was how the brothers of the world felt about their younger siblings.

I stretched my arms up toward the ceiling and felt my back crack, and I was reminded of my built-up fatigue. I was pretty tired, so I just felt like making something easy. But unlike me, those two girls were probably going to eat a lot, and I wanted to give Eve a good impression of Japan, so I couldn't afford to skimp on the volume. And so, I decided to make some pasta. I did just so happen to have some leftovers from a block of cheese in my fridge.

Heheh, this is going to be delicious.

This may have been rather sudden to say, but I had a deep fondness for Parmigiano Reggiano. It could be used in a wide array of dishes, and it had a rich flavor without being stinky. It was a wonderful ingredient that was full of umami and could elevate the quality of a dish by several ranks. Tonight, I wanted the residents of the fantasy world to learn about the deliciousness of this cheese.

I poured some water into a big pot, turned on the cooking fire, and then began preparing the ingredients. Though, pasta didn't really need much prep work at all. All I really had to do was peel some garlic and chop up some bacon. Maybe I would add some in-season asparagus, too.

I heated a frying pan over the stove and tossed some crushed garlic into the pan. Garlic was the key to making pasta. By transferring their aroma and flavor into olive oil, it gave the dish a greater depth of flavor. The strong scent snapped me out of my drowsiness a bit, and I felt myself focusing on the cooking more.

The preparations were complete. I tossed in some bacon, and it sizzled as I cooked it in the pan. The fat began melting from the heat, and I let the pieces turn crispy in the hot olive oil. The smell of garlic and bacon filled the room, and I felt an instinctive urge to have some white wine as usual.

It would have paired perfectly with the dish, but I had to feed the main guest of the day, Eve. The question of whether I should have been feeding her a western dish like pasta to welcome her to Japan did come up in my mind, but... I had already gone this far, so I decided not to worry about it. Well, it should have been okay as long as it tasted good.

And so, I grabbed a bundle of pasta and dumped it into the big pot. We did eat throughout the day, so five portions should have been enough. Any more, and I would have run out of eggs.

I took the milk and butter from the fridge and added them into the frying pan. It sizzled as it hit the hot pan and began bubbling after a moment. I continued to stir it to prevent it from burning and let it boil a bit.

Hmm, I'm starting to get hungry.

I stopped the fire and brought out a Kitase household favorite: the Parmigiano Reggiano, along with some salt and pepper. I then took the cooked pasta from the frying pan and...

Whoa, that's heavy!

Yeah, that was too much pasta to cook at once. I could have cooked it in smaller batches, but it was too late for that. I put some hot water in a smaller pot, boiled it, then turned off the fire. I then tossed an egg for each of us in that smaller pot and closed the lid. All I needed to do was leave it in for a few minutes to turn them into soft-boiled eggs.

Now I had some time to spare.

When I glanced at the table, I noticed a map of the theme park laid out there. This reminded me of Eve, who was still bathing at the moment. When I proposed the idea of betraying Zarish, she seemed to be tormented by the thought. Her expression remained the same as she told me everything she knew about Zarish's powers.

But what surprised me was, despite having been impaled through the heart, she still loved him. I was curious about their relationship, but I didn't think she was lying. During my time with her at the theme park, I realized she was the type of person who cared for her friends and wouldn't have tried to take advantage of others. She had to know that deceiving me wouldn't have led to any positive results.

"Hmm, I got enough info to work with now, so I just need to solidify a plan to deal with Zarish..." I nodded, then opened the lid of the small pot. It was time to get back to cooking.

I mixed the pasta in the sauce, then cracked a raw egg into it once it cooked down a bit... Oh, I didn't want to deal with adjusting the heat, so I usually added the egg later. This way, the heat from the pasta would have been enough to cook it without turning it all clumpy. That was what I had learned from my grandpa, anyway.

I stirred the whole thing around and transferred the pasta onto plates. Just as I was taking the soft-boiled eggs out of the small pot from earlier, I heard the door sliding open. Today's guest was just about to arrive.

“Ahhh, baths are seriously amazing! I can’t believe all that hot water just comes pouring out!”

Eve shouted as she stepped out of the dressing area. She was fresh out of the bath wearing a t-shirt and short shorts, an outfit that accentuated her allure... Yeah, I had to make a conscious choice to try not to look too much. I didn’t know why the residents of the fantasy world, other than Marie, didn’t really seem to mind exposing their skin. I couldn’t understand it at all.

“So hot...”

Oh no, don’t flap the hem of your shirt like that... Some people would consider that unladylike. No, really, please stop.

Her healthy and defined abs were completely exposed, forming a straight, upward line from her belly button. Not to mention that with her dark skin, the contours of her muscles were all the more clear cut. Hmm, it seemed that not being ladylike had its own brand of sex appeal.



Marie woke up from her rest on the bed, likely awakened by Eve's loud voice. I was just about to wake her up anyway, so the timing had worked out pretty well. Just as I was going to call out to her, Eve's voice rang out and cut me off.

"Heeey, what's this? I can tell it's good just from the smell!"

With that, she drifted over to me with unsteady steps like a zombie. This seemed to alert Marie, and her nose twitched, her expression indicating that she was more hungry than sleepy. She slowly rose, followed to her feet while barefoot just like the dark elf had, and then hugged me from behind.

"Welcome," I told her, and she flashed me a child-like smile.

"Mmm, smells like cheese. Say, what is this dish called?"

"This is carbonara. Would you like some alcohol, too, Marie?"

"Yes, this is one of those refined tastes of a lady that you mentioned, isn't it? Eve, you may borrow one of my beer glasses if you so desire."

Marie spoke with the prim expression of a gentle lady, to which Eve responded by bursting into laughter while holding her sides and shouting, "You sound just like an aristocrat!"

It seemed everyone was all the more lively thanks to the appetizing scent. One couldn't help but smile when they ate something delicious, and smells could produce the same effect, as well. This was all the more true with ice cold bottles of beer out on the table.

By the time Wridra came out of the bathroom, the table had already been set. Having a drink with dinner had become part of the routine now, and the black-haired beauty grinned and took a seat, as well. As an aside, there were only three seats for the table, so I had no choice but to sit on the stand used as a partition between the bed and dining area.

"Ahh, that is quite the scent. I simply love the aroma of freshly-ground black pepper. It stirs my appetite like no other when used to season meat." I poured her some beer, filling her glass with the crisp, golden beverage topped with foam. The dark elf stared with overt curiosity at the sight, seemingly unable to wait for the meal to begin. And so, with all eyes upon me, I raised a glass as the head of the household.

"Now, let's all give Eve a warm welcome. Like I said before, I don't plan on letting you get bored until the moment you fall asleep. Welcome to Japan... *Kanpai!*"

We gave our cheers and clinked our glasses together, and the two ladies who had just gotten out of the bath took a swig of their drink as if they had been waiting for this moment their whole lives. Cold beer ran through their heated bodies, and they drank in the beverages with audible gulps. Nice, cold drinks after playing until exhaustion. It was nothing short of pure bliss.

"Ahhh! This is seriously amazing! So cold and bubbly, and so smooth on the way down... What, are you all trying to kill me with happiness or something?"

"Mmmf! There is nothing like an ice cold glass after taking a bath! This is why I cannot go without coming to Japan!" Wridra exclaimed. Eve seemed to like the beer, too. Though, I wasn't too worried about the alcohol. Rather, the drinks available in the other world weren't all that great. Cheap liquor there smelled worse than dirty water, and it went without saying that it was served lukewarm. One could have forced them down if they were at least cold, but... Why would someone even pay money for something like that?

Marie took a fork in hand and sliced through the soft-boiled egg on her pasta. The yolk slowly oozed out onto the pasta, mixing together into an appetizing color. She deftly twirled noodles around her fork, then took her time slowly bringing it to her mouth, as if to savor the moment.

"Mmmmmmm!" She took one bite, then let out a satisfied groan as her pale purple eyes shot open.

The Parmigiano Reggiano, filled with concentrated flavor and umami, was an outstanding ingredient for this dish. The melty, gooey goodness filled one's senses with its signature cheesy scent, and its combination with the gentle flavor of the egg completely dominated one's taste buds with each bite.

The pasta had a satisfying texture, with just the right amount of firmness, and the crispy bacon's delicious fat, the fragrance of the black pepper, and the garlic all served as the perfect accents.

You couldn't swallow it without chewing the food, of course. But the cheese's umami went berserk in one's mouth while chewing, which was almost overwhelming. The flavors of eggs, cheese, and quality meat mixed together to deliver a wonderfully delicious punch. A smile curled up at the edge of Marie's lips. She continued chewing while staring at me, swallowed, then let out a satisfied breath.

"Nnn...! The egg... was amazing. Someday, if I see a bird, I just may start drooling."

"I'll have to keep you full so that won't happen. This is easy to make, so I could teach you later. I'm sure you'll learn it in no time, Marie."

She nodded enthusiastically, and I started to dig into my carbonara, too. Not used to eating pasta, Eve slurped up her noodles like ramen, then stopped. She chewed off the pasta hanging from her mouth, and her face went through surprised expressions as she chewed. Then, her body shook as a shiver ran down her spine. Her demeanor felt like there was a... "dark-elf like," or a wild feel to it.

She placed her fork on her plate and rubbed her cheeks with both hands, with a huge smile on her face. Apparently, this was a symptom that occurred when one's saliva production couldn't catch up. The savory goodness filled her mouth and spurred on more saliva production as she enjoyed the melted cheese and eggs. She finally swallowed, then sat there with a euphoric expression on her face.

"Ahh... this is so good... No, that doesn't even start to describe it. It's, I dunno, crazy good... Ah, ah! I think my knees just went weak!"

I laughed at her dramatic reaction, but was surprised to find she actually started massaging her own legs as if she had trouble moving them. But it seemed she was salivated enough now, and she used her open hand to eat pasta while massaging herself with the other.

There was just enough fat in the dish to make the beer taste all the better. We all drank and ate happily, and the table became lively with discussion as we began recollecting our day at the theme park. Eve poked at her asparagus with a straw as she turned to me, clearly having a nice buzz going.

"Man, today was full of so much fun. I might even dream about it tonight. Those rice balls were really good, too." We had only spent half a day together, but with a common topic of discussion and good food, our conversation went smoothly, as if we were all old friends. In any case, maybe dark elves were like elves in the sense that they didn't have much of an alcohol tolerance, because Eve sat with her butt hanging off of her chair a bit. She and Marie looked like sisters with both of their belly buttons showing, which I found rather cute. Their satisfied sighs were exactly alike, too.

"Ahh... Japan is seriously awesome. I don't wanna go back to my world now," Eve said.

"Whaaat? I can't believe it. I go into my dreams because I don't like this world. I mean, you can enjoy adventures in all sorts of fantasy landscapes." They looked at me as if I had just said something ridiculous. But the kind-hearted Ms. Elf decided to come to my aid. She looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully, then parted her lustrous lips to speak.

"Yes, I like the other world, too. Though, it wasn't until just recently that I realized how fun it is. Maybe I just became used to how unrestrained you all are."

"You may be right. I had been thoroughly bored of everything, but helping you two grow and watching your progress has been quite a joy. I have been constantly discovering new things, as well," Wridra replied. Marie and Wridra agreed with each other and smiled. I kind of understood why. The dragon and the elf enjoyed their time together no matter what world they were in, and they both always kept their eyes on the things they enjoyed despite whatever tumult surrounded them. Though, I did remember Marie being pretty free-spirited herself.

Just then, I was reminded of something Wridra had said to me. I realized the reason why she wanted me to fight Zarish.

"Do you mean there's something about him that will help me grow?"

"Hah, hah, that is entirely up to you. If you are not interested, I shall shoo him off immediately," she replied. Was that really it? If my master really cared that much for me, I wanted to at least meet her expectations to some degree. Though, I would probably have been killed within seconds in a standard duel.

Despite the topic of discussion, Eve continued to eat wordlessly without making so much as a dissatisfied expression. Even though we were talking about how to defeat the person she loved most... This told me that the promise we had made at the park was sincere.

Marie noticed right away that something had changed. Her long ears perked up as she stared at Eve, her expression telling me that she was trying to figure out what was discussed while she was asleep.

"Wh-What? I'm not plotting anything."

"I'm not suspecting you of anything. I already think of you as a friend, Eve. Let's work together and crush that creepy guy." Upon hearing Marie's cruel comment with her flowery smile, Eve couldn't help but freeze in place with a drawn, awkward smile. But maybe Eve understood why Marie would call him "creepy," because she swallowed her retort with another swig of beer. Wridra watched them as she tilted her own glass, then shot me a glance.

"Hmm. If you intend to punish him without taking his life, it will only make it all the more difficult. Do you have a plan?" she asked. Ah, so she had heard the conversation between Eve and me. Or maybe she predicted it. As long as we were collaborating with Eve, we couldn't have just outright killed him. Eve wished for a more peaceful resolution.

In any case, I told Wridra that I'd been expecting her to ask just that and rose from my seat. It was quicker to show her than to explain, so I pulled out the thing I had rented on the way home in front of everyone. Contained within the square, plastic case was a movie DVD. It was a case for rentals, so it didn't have the original sleeve, but the ominous lettering and decorations on the disc made Marie and Wridra twitch with an uncomfortable look on their faces.

The title was indeed unsettling. It was, predictably, a horror title, and probably far exceeded their expectations. Earlier today, Wridra had openly admitted that she didn't handle things related to horror and the occult well, so the glare she gave me was understandable. So I decided to take a vote.

"Umm, who *doesn't* want to watch this?"

"Me, me!" Marie and Wridra raised their hands enthusiastically. Eve was sitting between them and glanced side to side at the both of them. But it wasn't that she had agreed or disagreed; she simply wasn't familiar with the concept of movies.

She sat with proper posture at the table and raised her hand straight up. If I were a teacher, I would have been pleased by her studiousness. But I was no teacher, and I was the complete opposite when it came to having good posture, so I was slightly saddened.

Wridra looked up at me with her lips pouted and the whites of her eyes showing in a sullen expression. She ran her fingers through her still-damp hair with a rather displeased expression.

"No one here wishes to watch such a thing. Just look at that repulsive text. I doubt it is anything worthwhile."

"She's right, I don't want it ruining my sleep. Besides, how is that going to lead to beating Zarish? It simply doesn't make any sense." Marie joined in to support Wridra's argument and pointed her fork at me in a display of bad table manners. Right, they had a point. I was holding a horror DVD that I was planning on using as a reference to lay a trap for Zarish the hero candidate. But since the residents of the fantasy world were unfamiliar with the horror genre, they were having a hard time connecting the dots. Just as I was considering this, Eve tentatively raised her hand.

"Hmm, I don't know what that disc thing is, but if it's scary, I'll pass. We were having a good time eating and drinking, so I don't wanna ruin the mood." It seemed she saw how everyone else was reacting and deduced what it was. Realizing now that everyone was against me, my sadness grew even deeper.

"Why don't we try changing our perspective a bit? It isn't going to be us that's going to get scared this time, but Zarish." The girls all looked at each other, confused. Scary movies were meant to scare people, but this was just reference material, and the main event would have been the battle against him after we fell asleep.

"So you're saying we're going to do to him what you did to us at Grimland? As in, surprise and scare him?"

"That's right. Wridra, would it be possible to use the visualization magic you showed me before to show us his mansion from somewhere far away? It would be even more interesting if you could show the interior and pick up audio." Wridra made a contemplative noise to herself as she placed a fingertip to her finely-shaped eyebrow. She gave it some thought before opening her mouth. Her impish grin told me that she had figured out what I was thinking despite having very few hints to work with.

"Hah, hah, so you intend to make a mockery out of the hero candidate. You are indeed a malicious man at heart."

"Hehe, I wouldn't say I'm all that bad. Well, maybe. Anyway, if it's possible, I would be glad if you could record it so I can take a look later." We both chuckled evilly, and I had secured one ally for my little scheme. Marie and Eve didn't quite follow, and they watched us with raised eyebrows. The first one to speak was Zarish's former subordinate, Eve. She raised her hand a little bit and asked her question with an uncertain expression.

"But do you really think you can scare Zarish? This is the same person who laughs while cutting down demons."

"In this case, I don't think levels or swordsmanship are going to help in any way. Just like how Wridra was screaming at Grimla— Ngg!" My sentence was cut off with a pained grunt as Wridra's fist slammed into my side. It was a well-placed body blow that landed right into my core. I winced and rubbed my side while I continued to explain.

"And we won't be dealing with him directly, so this will be a safe approach. If it doesn't work, we can just try something else."

"Hmm, that does sound safe, so I think I agree. But if he gets all scared and screams... Hehe, that does sound fun, actually," Eve said. I actually wasn't sure if he would get scared. He was an adult, so maybe it wouldn't have fazed him. But if he really did let out shrieks of terror, it would have been quite satisfying to see.

Eve grinned, and I had secured another ally for the cause. I glanced at the last person remaining, and Marie looked at me, as if surprised.

"Oh, I'm on your side, of course. I simply don't want to watch scary things. But I'll do what I must if it's part of the plan, and I don't want to be left out. If I cry, it will be your fault. Just remember that."

She let out a resigned sigh, and our group was finally in agreement. And so, our horror movie viewing party was about to begin. I turned the TV that was facing the bed toward us to prepare. To be honest, I didn't really understand this type of horror, so I wanted to hear the opinions of people who found it scary. Those types of people would likely have been better at coming up with terrifying ideas.

I took the disc out of the case and put it into the DVD player. After a delay, white noise began to play from the screen.

"I'm going to turn the lights down now," I announced.

"You will not!" Wridra said.

"You don't understand women at all. You're awful," Marie said.

"Ahaha, look at Kazuhiro's face! Too funny!"

I was surprised. I never realized how painful the word "awful" could be. I staggered, but somehow managed to keep from crumpling to the floor. But the girls didn't follow up with further attacks. The TV screen continued to buzz with an inexplicable, unsettling air about it.

Suddenly, a kitchen was displayed on the screen. It wasn't a kitchen that had been tidied up for filming, but a messy one that had clear signs of being used. Someone clearly lived there, and the cheap milk strewn about hinted at the resident being rather poor. They had only done the bare minimum of cleaning, but the dishes alone were sparkling clean. As I took a better look, I saw that someone had marked the days for burnable waste pickup on the calendar.

"...I'm already scared." Eve's voice came out as a whimper, but no one dared laugh at her. Everyone empathized with her to some degree.

The picture quality was pretty poor overall. They used natural lighting instead of artificial light for the most part, so it was sometimes too dark to pick out the details. This provided a rather unique ambiance that the girls hadn't experienced in the movies they had watched for fun. Maybe to them, it felt like someone was living their life just on the other side of that screen.

"Hmm, yeah, this inorganic feeling and the sense of someone living here is a little scary. Maybe the lack of colors are making it all the more realistic," Marie observed.

"Hey, so this is a 'movie'? Is it showing the inside of someone's house or something? Oh, who's that?"

A girl clad in a school uniform appeared through the entrance and announced, "I'm home!" in a youthful voice. Her voice was like a light shining through darkness and provided some relief from the sense of foreboding that was there just a moment ago.

"What did she just say? Was that Japanese?"

"You are like a noisy child. Here, I will translate for you. Sit next to me. Hmm, the Japanese may be mild-mannered, but seeing their black hair and pale skin in such stark contrast makes them look somewhat unnerving." The other girls agreed with cheery voices. It was understandable. The story had barely begun, and even the protagonist of the movie didn't feel any sense of danger.

With the main character being a young girl, it was likely easier for the women watching over her to empathize. An ominous atmosphere could be felt here and there, but the world was at peace for now. But the everyday life one was accustomed to could have vanished abruptly. The girl found a ticket by chance one day, and she wouldn't have realized until later on that she would never have been able to return to normalcy because of it.

Even as someone died in a mysterious incident, she still thought of herself as an observer who was safe from danger. But there was no telling what would have happened if she took another step further.

"That would be a bad move... Do not get any closer..." Wridra uttered under her breath.

There was a distinct sense of something being out of place within the girl's everyday life. An ominous presence could have been felt, drawing everyone's eyes. This didn't just apply to the main character, but us, as well. "I don't want to look. I don't want to get closer." It was likely human instinct that made us feel this way. We felt something stirring inside us, an inexplicable chill in the air.

There was nothing shocking being displayed on the screen. There was no blood or ear-piercing screams. But, we all felt that disturbing sense that something was definitely wrong. The ladies naturally began taking more sips from their tea.

But against the wishes of Marie and the others, the girl moved closer to the foreboding "something," as if drawn to it. She told herself that it was her job, and that she wanted to find out more.

"Nooo, you can't get closer..."

"I've been dying to know what it is, so I'm looking..."

At last, the lid hiding the secret is opened.

The screen shook unnaturally, revealing the identity of the feeling of wrongness to the viewers and portraying the fact that the girl had taken a step across the line of normalcy.

The footage we saw was, in a manner of speaking, abnormal. There were people in ordinary clothing visible, showing no emotions and writhing about in a detached manner. But this... What was this unusual display? The girls

seemed to be feeling a sense of foreignness, like something crawling under their skin.

I observed them curiously while leaning on the kitchen sink. It appeared that the inexplicable sense that something was out of the ordinary was where the fear came from.

Marie turned toward me and wordlessly beckoned me over. I cocked my head and moved closer, and then she made me sit where she had just been sitting.

I wondered what was going on, but then she plopped down onto my lap. Still, I didn't really understand. She let out a satisfied puff of air from her nose, but perhaps the gesture meant "I'll be okay now"? I wanted to ask, but Marie didn't turn around to face me.

So, I decided to get back to the movie like her.

It seemed the girl finally realized she had opened the door to abnormality. Maybe what happened next was meant to be a message of welcome. A loud noise reverberated from the kitchen, and the ladies of our group trembled all at once.

"Ohooo! That one certainly got me!" Wridra exclaimed.

"Whoa, look, look!" Eve said.

"I got goosebumps!"

They both laughed, for some reason. As for Marie, I could feel her heart thumping from behind her, and it seemed she didn't have the emotional capacity to laugh at the moment. She then turned around and whispered into my ear.

(Hey, why aren't you scared?)

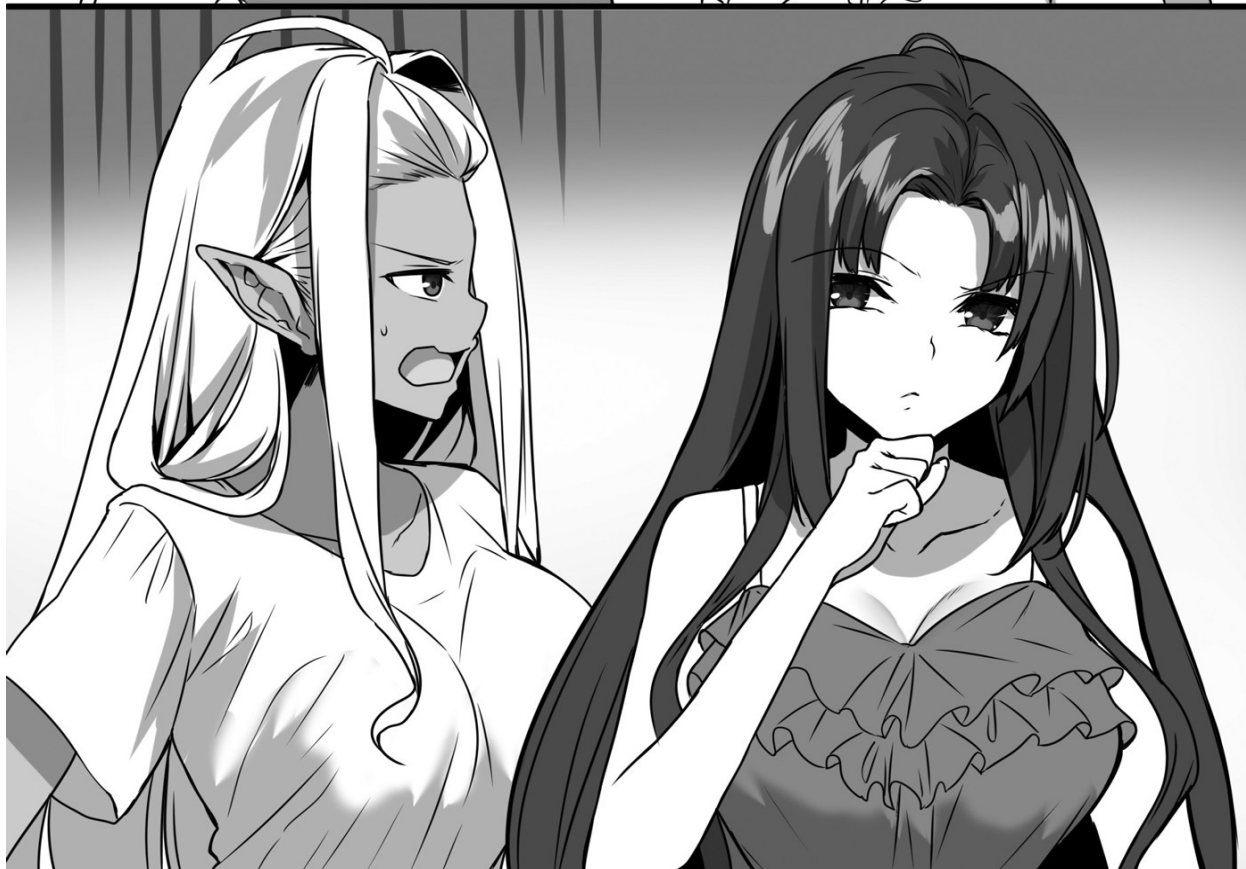
(I am, but... I'm more surprised by jump scares that pop out like, "bam!")

She told me I was strange and cocked her head cutely, but the sight of a horror movie playing behind her was already out of the ordinary for me.

Now, this story was rather cruel, and it went on as if things had gone back to being peaceful. It could have potentially been easier to accept if things had stayed in the peculiar state, but they were now giving the audience hope that everything would be okay. The sight of the girls' friends and family provided a sense of relief, and she soon assumed she had only imagined everything.

"There it is. It is important to make you think things have been resolved now," Wridra commented.

"Aaagh, this is the worst. If I got attacked after having my guard down like this, I'd totally cry," Eve said in a pained voice as she shook Wridra by her shoulders from behind. Meanwhile, I realized this made for a good reference and took mental notes.



From there, we were shown various scenes of things being back to normal in her everyday life, but one thing I noticed was that the tempo was slowly ramping up overall. The interval between relief and fear was becoming more and more narrow, and the viewer would soon realize something. Something was coming, slowly but surely.

Strangely, Marie kept shifting her position each time. She placed my arm onto her stomach, did the same to the other one, then finally sat sideways with her arms around me.

"Um, Ms. Marie..." I asked.

"Shh, be quiet. My, I still can't block it out completely... Horror movies truly are horrifying."

She said it with a rather resolute expression, but something was off here. Well, it wasn't as if it didn't make me happy, but it was like we were straying further and further from a horror movie atmosphere.

Finally, the story was reaching its end. The mystery had been unraveled, and the girl mustered her courage to resolve all of the issues. Even the Arkdragon couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief, and the dark elf put a hand to her own bountiful chest with a similar sentiment. Then, they high-fived each other.

But, for some reason, the story wasn't over yet. It seemed the movie was utilizing even the sense of relief after the big resolution, and the screen simply displayed scenes of average daily life, giving us all a sense of unease once again.

"Oho... Quite disturbing..." Wridra said.

"I can't handle this kind of stuff! Ahh, wait... No, no! Nooo, not that!" Eve's shriek prompted me to look at the screen, and abnormality had returned once again. Slowly, slowly, taking its sweet time. It had allowed for plenty of time to think of countermeasures, and just as the viewers were dazed by the realization that there was nothing that could have been done, it approached closer and closer.

"Oho, ho... Turn it off! Turn off the TV!"

"Wait, what? You can turn it off?! You should've said so!"

With that, the ladies turned to face me. Hmm, give them a sense of relief, then strike fear into their hearts... I decided to give this freshly-learned technique a try. And so, I replied with the most reassuring voice I could muster.

"Yeah, I think that was plenty for research purposes. All right, I'll turn it off now." I picked up the remote, then pretended to press the button several times.

"Huh? That's weird... What...?"

"Whaaa, wh-wh-what are you doing?! Quickly, quickly! It is coming closer!"

"H-H-Heeey, Kazuhiroooo! Kazu, hurry up! Hey, Kazu!"

I see, so this is how you scare them. I let the remote slip from my hands. The loud *clank* as it landed on the table and the moment the “something” on the other side of the screen came at us were simultaneous.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaa!”

A shrill scream sounded throughout the condo, and it seemed everyone got to enjoy the true essence of horror movies.

As an aside, I asked the group for their thoughts on the movie, and they responded with “It was surprisingly fun,” and “I could watch one again,” so I felt like I understood women even less after all this. As for Marie, she just clung on to me with her heart still racing.

Chapter of Slavery, Episode 10: At the Manor Where the Black Roses Bloom

Arilai, Zarish Manor, Evening—

The sky was covered in a thick cloud, as if it was in the middle of the rainy season. Thunder crackled over the manor that was owned by the hero candidate known as Zarish.

In the country covered in a vast expanse of sand known as Arilai, the ruling king gave rewards to those who made contributions through military prowess. As the one who owned more land than all others, there were high expectations for Zarish's future. But he walked through his wide corridor with a sullen expression and somewhat aggressive steps. His heels clicked on the stone pavement with each step, his brows furrowed deeply. His frustration was all but palpable. The beautiful women referred to as his collection seemed to sense his irate air and maintained some distance.

Last night, he had made contact with the two women he sought after. The pair were an incredibly rare draconian and an extremely talented half-fairy elf. He had disposed of the pesky boy and the now-unnecessary dark elf with his own hands and obtained what he wanted... or so he had thought.

"Damn it, what the hell was that...?!" He slammed his fist into a wall out of frustration. Web-shaped cracks spread across the wall, and women could be heard shrieking in surprise.

He had extended his hand to that draconian with such elation last night, but she had looked down on him with a mocking smile and turned her back, as if to say he wasn't worth her time. By the time he turned around, the boy and the dark elf's bodies, and even the blood that had splattered on the ground, had vanished without a trace, and he just stood frozen at the bizarre sight.

Before he knew it, even his two targets had disappeared, leaving only his pale-faced underlings standing there with him. When he asked the others what had happened, they told him they had seen it with their own eyes. The boy and the dark elf both just faded into thin air like a mirage.

No one had seen them since then.

The manor had been in a state of full humidity, as was standard during the rainy season. It was once full of splendor, but there was an evident gloominess that could be felt throughout the place.

Zarish was deep in thought as he walked down the corridor, and then he suddenly stopped in his tracks. The personnel managing the manor were speaking in hushed voices. Zarish peered into the dim room from the corridor to find uniformed members of his collection there.

"There were so many creepy crows in the yard..."

"My, it's like some sort of curse. I felt like I was being watched all day yesterday, too."

Zarish dismissed it as foolishness. They were an elite group that had sent countless foes to the afterlife, yet they were worried about curses and stares?

He glanced at the window in the corridor and heard the rain trickling down onto the sand. Normally, the rain would have been considered a blessing, but the sight made him instinctively wipe the uncomfortable clamminess on his neck. The rainy season would continue for some time.

Raindrops quietly pattered against the windowpane as he penned a letter, and he looked up and stared at it after some time. This room incorporated glass in much of its design, and he was usually able to enjoy the bright sunlight here. There was a tree planted by the window that would have allowed him to spend his time comfortably in the shade. But now, he was simply fed up with the humid, sweaty discomfort from this weather.

Knock, knock.

The sound of someone knocking on the hard door reverberated through his room, and Zarish gave the visitor permission to enter with a magnanimous tone. A woman in a maid outfit entered the room.

"It was just as you surmised, Lord Zarish. I have received reports that the interrogation is making little progress."

"Hmph... He is under a spell that will inflict a curse upon himself and those around him if he makes a confession. That would be one way to get rid of the captives, but... That old geezer will surely notice then."

Yet, the rebels that had been captured didn't have much information to speak of. Only less than half of them were caught, and from the looks of it, they were just expendable grunts that were only in it for the pay or to get revenge.

Gedovar, the neighboring country known as the land of demons, already had their next move to prevent the exploration of ancient labyrinths ready. Now that they had sent in their forces across borders, it was unlikely that they were under the impression that their secret would be kept hidden. It was only a matter of time before a full-blown battle between countries would break out. Zarish grinned.

The "old geezer" he had just referred to was Aja the wizard. Zarish had used the funding provided by Aja and managed to grow up to this point. But now that he had failed to acquire his two targets, there was nothing else for him to gain here. He just needed to wait for the right moment now... However, there was something dark and viscous spreading within him.

"Is something the matter, Lord Zarish?"

"It's nothing. Now, come over here."

The woman, who was a servant and a member of his collection, bowed politely, and then Zarish slowly embraced her. Their tongues intertwined as he held her voluptuous body in his arms. She tasted pure and sweet, but it was far from her true nature. She enjoyed being taken aggressively, and when he opened her mouth by force, she made a slovenly expression and her body immediately grew hot with embarrassment.

Her body felt sticky to the touch from the heat and humidity, but when dealing with such a fine woman, even the excessive humidity was part of the enjoyment. He considered such thoughts as he caressed her twitching body.

Zarish had acquired this woman three years ago for a hefty price, along with this manor of black roses. House Blackrose was well-known among aristocrats and commoners alike. They were an incredibly powerful house that had ruled over this land until finally yielding to the royal family after a battle spanning over a thousand days. But as the years passed, they were unable to upkeep this grand manor and desperately clung on to life out of pride as a noble household. Their flourishing garden and their military might was a thing of the forgotten past.

Zarish was the one who had dealt the finishing blow to their bloodline, and this young woman, a knight of the black rose, was nothing more than a trembling lamb by now. Indeed, he was the one and only hero candidate of this world. Nothing was out of reach for him, and he was a being who lived life better than anyone. As this realization set in, he felt his displeasure from the rain and frustration from earlier dissipate.

Just then, the two eased up slightly in their embrace. Things were just beginning to get heated, but they both looked at the window and stared at the fluttering curtain.

"Oh, the window... I will close it so the rain doesn't get in."

"I don't recall opening it..." Zarish said.

No, something was off. Who in their right mind would have opened the window in the middle of this rain? Let alone while writing a letter for such a long time. Such questions began running through Zarish's mind.

"You should have simply watched admiringly from afar... But now you have meddled with the Phantom."

The words flashed in his mind despite being in the midst of an intimate encounter. The words from that black-haired draconian woman... He couldn't help but remember that boy's eyes staring at him ever since then. Come to think of it, there was something very strange about that boy. There was no fear in his eyes even on the verge of death, and he simply watched with his lifeless, observing eyes. The expression was so foreign to Zarish that the memory had left a lasting impression on him. Or was it because his corpse had inexplicably vanished?

"Lord Zarish?"

The window had been closed before he knew it, and the sound of rain had quieted down. The maid stared up at him with a confused expression, the look in her eyes seeming to ask whether they were going to pick up where they had left off.

There was no curse. There couldn't have been. Still, he couldn't help but stare. His eyes were fixated on the wet footprints near the closed window. Small footprints... as if they were left by a child. He was still staring at those footprints as he spoke in a rigid tone.

"...Something is wrong. Conduct a search within the premises."

“What? Y-Yes, then I will call for Hakua the fortuneteller right away.”

The security level here was among the highest in all of Arilai, and intruders were extremely uncommon. But if there were an intruder, the situation would have been dire. It would mean there was a possibility that his betrayal of his homeland had been discovered, and the royal family was making a move. But the maid bowed without a trace of worry on her face and left the room. The word of her master was absolute, and there was no room for questioning. She was his pawn, and he was her controller.

“More importantly...” he uttered to himself, “Why was the window open? Rather... did someone come in here?”

He felt as if he had just found a foreign object under his skin. If someone had tried to open the lock, he should have heard it. He considered this as he moved the lock on the window with a creak.

He had purchased this manor three years ago. In order to acquire the woman with the title of the Knight of the Black Rose, he had set a trap for their household and wiped them all out. The only one to notice what was happening at the planning stage was the woman from earlier. But she didn’t express any complaints or displeasure, and she didn’t even think of crossing Zarish. As long as she wore that ring...

The ring was part of a pair, and it made the wearer swear loyalty to whoever wore the other piece. Not only that, but it had a terrifying Primary Skill that allowed the owner to steal levels. Zarish had the incredibly rare ability to materialize skills into rings. This was how he had made his climb to these heights. His finger instinctively reached to touch his rings. As long as he wore these, he wouldn’t lose to anyone. No one and nothing could defeat him.

Guaaaaaaargh!

The shrill screech made him snap back to focus. A black bird flew down to the other side of the window, cocking its head to the left and right and watching Zarish with its beady eyes.

CAAAAAAAAAAAAAWWW!

It was somewhat of an unpleasant sight. Seeing a black bird... that is, a crow, so closely in the desert was not so common. The garbage-rifling bird screeched out loud without showing a hint of fear.

“What’s up with this thing? Get lost.”

Zarish knocked on the window with irritation, and then something black came falling from above the windowpane... Two more crows of the same exact size. His skin crawled just a bit at the jarringly unnatural sight. Although the window was of the highest quality, there was a faint fogginess to it that prevented one from seeing the other side clearly. Yet, when he squinted his eyes, Zarish could see that the garden almost looked like it had turned black...

“I know it’s wet from the rain, but was the garden ever this black...?”

Slowly, hesitantly, he began unlocking the window. He shooed off the creepy crows as he did so, then decided to look around his surroundings. He

would have his subordinates do a complete scan of the property, have a meal and drink the thoughts of the ominous presence away, then climb into a warm bed with his beautiful women.

He pictured the women raising their voices in passion and decided that was exactly what he would do. He unlocked the window and opened it. The wind and rain blew into the room, causing the curtains to billow wildly. But Zarish was at a momentary loss for words. Under the window and in the garden, masses of blackness were staring directly at him.

CAAAW! CAAAAAAW! CAAAAAAW!

Their synchronized cries were so unnerving that it sent a shiver down his spine. They were nothing but birds, but he had never seen so many crows at once in his life. No, a hero candidate did not feel fear. That was only for lowly commoners.

And so, he turned on his heel and reached for a stick from inside his room. He decided he just needed to scare them off and exited through the door leading to the terrace. All he had to do was crush a few of them, and the rest would leave. He walked through the garden slowly, swinging his stick around while making intimidating noises. Sure enough, the crows began to flee. He felt a weight lifting from his chest.

But perhaps they didn't want to fly in the rain, because they simply fluttered a short distance away and hopped around the garden. Zarish ignored the rain as he chased them around a corner and found himself in front of the office from earlier.

The countless crows covering the lawn still made for a disturbing sight. But he noticed there was something strange in the center of their crowd. Someone stood there, lifeless and stock still, their black hair soaking in the rain as they groaned.

"Ah...!"

Before he knew it, Zarish's stick had fallen to the stone pavement. He didn't even realize he had let go of it. His shoulders trembled as it made a high-pitched *clang*, and he felt cold sweat running down his back.

It was a bit hard to breathe. The humidity in the air and dense atmosphere that was so unfamiliar in his own garden made it feel as if he had stepped into ruins. The one before him was no illusion. They were definitely there. Their arms limply hung to the ground, still groaning as the rain washed over their body. Just then, Zarish realized something. Whoever was standing creepily before him... was someone he had seen just recently.

"Don't tell me... Are you that brat from last night? Then this is all your doing, isn't it?!"

Zarish felt his face grow heated and picked up the stick he had dropped earlier, then began walking toward the boy. Black crows surrounded him, but they would surely have left if he took out their source. First, he would beat the boy's shoulders and back repeatedly and render him unable to stand. Then, he would rip out the boy's innards.

His shoulders swayed with each step, pure rage driving him forward through the lawn. The sound of the rain hitting the sand was somewhat annoying, but there was no stopping him until he heard that boy's cries of pain. The boy's mouth was visible as he looked at Zarish with downcast eyes, his lips distorting into the shape of a saucer.

"Haha, I've got you now! You creepy little shit!" Zarish reached out and grabbed him. Or so he thought, but the boy slipped through Zarish's fingers as soon as he touched him, only leaving his expression as he vanished into thin air...

CAAAAAAW! CAAAAAAW, CAAAAAAW! CAAAAAATAAAAAWWWW!

Before he knew it, he was surrounded by the shrill cries of the crows. They all flew off at once, and seeing that creature dissolve before his eyes left him stunned, as if all of the blood had left his body at once.

It was evening already, and the sun provided little lighting. Zarish stood still under the rainclouds as thunder crackled overhead. He wiped his forehead, breathing in rough, shallow breaths.

Something was wrong. This wasn't normal. He turned to look at the manor, and the scenery seemed cold, as if to reflect the state of his own emotions. Zarish still didn't realize the reason behind it.

He walked forward for some time with the stick still in hand, and then it stopped raining. He found himself under the eaves before he knew it and let out an exhausted sigh.

"Lord Zarish! Is something the matter? You're soaking wet..."

"Crows... No, never mind. Bring me a towel."

Two maids rushed up to him as soon as he returned to the dim manor. They looked up at him with concern, and the light of their lamps brought him some relief. What he had seen earlier had to be some sort of mistake. There was no other explanation...

"Well, enjoy, Zarish."

The mocking voice of the draconian he had heard last night echoed in his mind, and he slammed his stick against the wall in a flash of rage. The women cried out at the sudden and loud noise, but Zarish's anger hadn't subsided.

"What did that damned woman do to my manor?! If I ever find her, I'll drag her around by her hair!" He then came to his senses and noticed his frightened subordinates. Their hands were clenched so tightly that their knuckles were white, likely because he had murdered a member of his own collection before. Even if they swore their undying loyalty, they still couldn't hide the fear of Zarish turning his sword on them. But right now, he didn't even have the capacity to offer them soothing words out of a fake gesture of kindness.

"Bring me a towel, now! And have some liquor ready for me in my room!"

The women rushed away at once, and Zarish began to feel better as their footsteps grew fainter. But his irritation at that woman mocking him still

lingered, and he headed back to his room with his shoulders scrunched up angrily. Those who stood near him quickly gave way, and he eventually made it back to his room.

He pushed the door open with a creak, and the room was tinged with the faint light peering in through the window. Zarish picked up a lamp that was nearby, feeling the cold metal against his fingers. A spell had already been prepared for it, so he only simply ordered it to “turn on,” and it lit up.

The room became visible under the dim lighting. There was a lavish bed there, and comfortable-looking chairs and a table were arranged by the window. The room was decorated with refined furniture, and the window was tightly shut. He tentatively reached out for the lock on the window and confirmed that it was indeed locked.

“It’s closed...”

He let out a sigh of relief and placed his lamp on the table. The lamp hit the hard surface with a metallic *ding*, filling the room with a warm light. Of course, there was no such thing as a fireplace in the desert country. Lamps and spirits were generally used as the main sources of light.

“...Right, Eve isn’t here anymore.”

That dark elf did all sorts of work, including maintenance of the garden, but he now had her ring again. Zarish unconsciously touched the matching ring, which was designed to fit it like a puzzle piece. That girl had diligently worked for him like a dog, but things were not so peaceful that he could’ve let someone who knew his secret roam free. He had ended her life as a result, but...

Wait, was she truly dead in the first place? Her blue, wide-open eyes were still burned into his memory. But her corpse had vanished, so what if she appeared again like that boy had in his garden? Zarish shook his head, as if to shake off these pointless thoughts. It was better not to think about it. For now, he would just wipe down his wet body and drink some alcohol. But what was taking those women so long? It shouldn’t have taken so long just to get a towel and something to drink. He sat there irritated for some time, then heard the door handle begin to turn.

“Took you long enough. Come in, and give me that towel alrea—”

The door knob creaked as it turned halfway, then stopped. Something felt wrong. He could sense that someone was standing on the other side of the door, trying to open it. But why were the women, who had sworn their eternal loyalty to him, not knocking before trying to enter?

Creak, creak, creak... The knob began to shake up and down, and Zarish felt his vision grow dark. It was like a child was excitedly moving it up and down. The repeating noise of the knob moving in the otherwise-silent and dim room made him gulp audibly.

He began slowly walking forward. Light from the hallway could be seen from the bottom of the door, with shadows being cast by someone’s feet. That meant there was certainly someone there. His breath became more labored from an unseen pressure, and he loosened the collar of his shirt.

Then, he stood in front of the door, ready to grab whoever was standing behind it.

"...o... z..." His hand, which had been reaching for the door knob, froze in place when he heard the faint voice coming from behind the door. He moved closer without thinking, straining to make out the words. The voice became more and more clear... He pressed his ear right up against the door, and he could feel the subtle vibrations in the air.

"...Ohh... oh... Zar... i..."

The voice sounded cursed. The source of the quiet mutters were very close. He couldn't help but imagine the unseen stranger behind the door, smacking their lips around as they said whatever they were saying. His breathing gradually grew more shallow. His skin felt moist, and sweat trickled down his forehead. Just as he was wondering what in the world was going on...

"...Open it..."

A chill ran down Zarish's spine. It was as if the voice knew he was listening with his ear against the door, and his eyes were instinctively drawn to the door knob. The metallic knob incrementally jerked downward at the pace of the second hand of a clock. It would open any moment now.

Would he open it himself, hold the knob down, or hide somewhere? Various options flashed through his mind, but time continued to move forward without a decision being made.

Creeeeeeeak... Click.

...It... opened...

The door slowly creaked open, and Zarish pressed his shoulder against it without thinking. He felt as if something horrible and terrifying were awaiting him and held the door shut with both hands. He held it closed with all his might.

Bam, bam, bang!

Someone was tackling the door with incredible force. The impact landed on Zarish's shoulders and ran all the way through his back, making him exhale air through his gritted teeth with each hit. This power wasn't that of a girl's. The sound of flesh being violently slammed against the hard surface was clearly inhuman.

What was happening? Wasn't Zarish the one who was about to grab the intruder? Why was he the one desperately trying to keep the door closed? Why? This was his manor. But if this door opened, whoever was on the other side would barge into his room. Yes, his subordinates should have been there soon. He just had to hold off until then.

His heartbeat was insufferably loud. But as he held on for dear life, it seemed it was finally time for relief. The pressure from the other side let up, and silence fell upon the room. Zarish felt sticky sweat all over his body, his eyes darting around to scan his surroundings. Then, a different noise sounded from the door.

Knock, knock...

Two polite knocks.

There was a vaguely feminine tone to it that brought him some relief.

"Who is it...?" His voice was hoarse as he asked the question, and he swallowed his own saliva. Since when had his throat been so dry? But a maid had arrived with the towel and liquor he had ordered. But wait... Why wasn't she answering right away?

Knock, knock...

The only response was more knocking, and Zarish's hand froze on its way to the door knob. His heart began pumping blood rapidly through his body, and sweat erupted out of his face.

I'm Zarish, damn it. The future hero. So why am I cowering in my own room? I'll kill them. I'll fucking kill them. I'll grab whatever is behind that door and cut it in half!

He set his resolve and busted the door open with all of his might. Then...

"Huh? Lord Zarish...?" The woman who had been standing there jumped in surprise at the look in Zarish's eyes, nearly dropping her tray in the process. She quickly regained balance and straightened herself.

Meanwhile, Zarish crumpled to his knees. The immense sense of relief and the fact that he could finally breathe left him panting.

"Is something the matter, Lord Zarish?"

"No... I just... don't feel well..."

He must have looked terrible. The maid hurriedly began wiping Zarish's face, then supported him by the shoulders and took him into his room.

"You look so pale, sir... Please, take a seat on the bed."

"Yeah... Right, Puseri, you stand outside the door tonight." His orders were absolute. No one could defy a direct command from him.

There was confusion in the woman's eyes, but she replied, "Yes, sir," without hesitation. The bed creaked as Zarish lowered himself onto it. The woman finished wiping down his sweat, then bowed.

"Then I shall stand guard until the morning. Please rest well."

Zarish watched the door close behind her and let out a big sigh of relief.

It would be fine now. Even if something happened, she would put her life on the line to deal with it. Forget eating. He would just sleep until morning and figure things out then. And so, he laid down onto his bed. His body sank into the soft, expensive bedding.

Haah...

He let out a weak, drawn-out sigh toward the ceiling. Something was off. The manor was different from usual. He just couldn't put his finger on it, which was frustrating him to no end.

Just then, he rolled over to the side and noticed a strange sensation. Something moist clung to his arm, along with what felt like water. His nose twitched, and recognized a foul, metallic odor. He sat up and raised his lamp to find it was covered in something black. His eyes widened.

...Was there something under the blankets? Honestly, he didn't even want to consider the idea.

His eyes darted between the door and bed several times, but there was no way he could tell his subordinate he was afraid of his own bed.

Zarish breathed heavily as he clutched his blanket.

It's fine, it's fine... Nothing. There's nothing here. Even if there is, no one could possibly beat me. Still breathing with shallow, labored breaths, he slowly began peeling back the blanket.

I hate this, I hate this...

The moment he flipped the blanket back, the sight of a woman's blood-soaked hair and limbs flashed into view, causing the muscles of his entire body to convulse in shock. Whatever it was swiftly scuttled back under the blanket, and he couldn't take it anymore. It was too much.

"Kyaaaaaaa!!!" He leapt into the air, screeching as loud as he could.

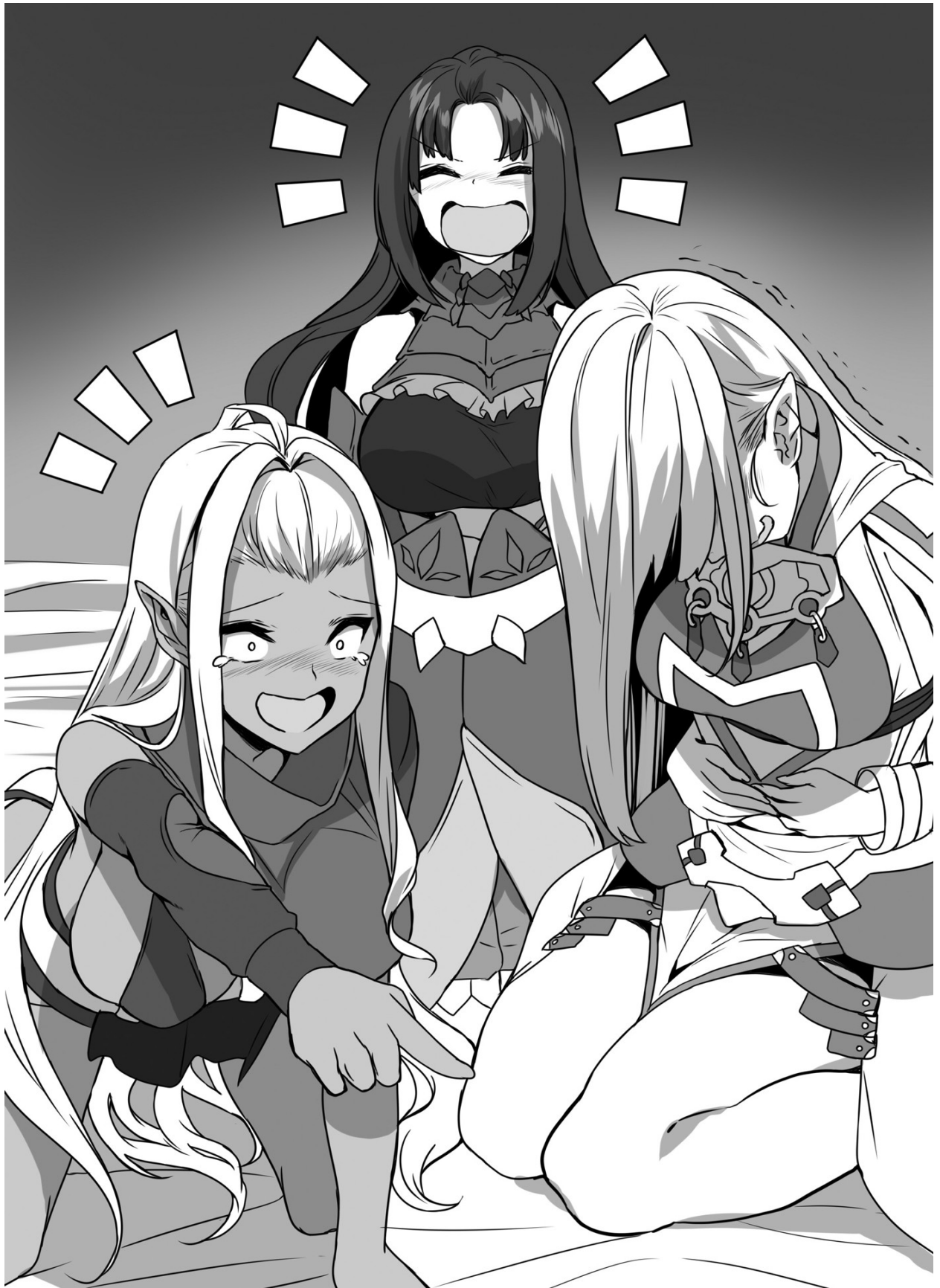
§

The three women hunched over while clutching their stomachs, then bent backward like a rebounding spring.

"Nngaaaaaaaaahahaha! Gaaaaaahaha!"

"Ahahaha! He... he said, 'Kyaaaaaaa!' Oh my goodness, my sides!"

"Did you see him jump?! The great hero candidate flew into the air!"



The group roared with laughter as they thrashed about within the Thousand household's grounds, just several hundred meters away from Zarish's manor. We had prepared a sound-proofing effect to prevent disturbing others, but the bedroom had been quite noisy. I was listening in via Mind Link Chat, but I couldn't quite find the right timing to get a word in. The three women were still rolling on the floor laughing, and I could hear someone having a coughing fit. At this rate, they probably wouldn't have even heard me if I said something. I mean, they did see some rare footage of the hero candidate, after all.

Marie was supposed to be the control tower of this operation, which meant she would display the current state inside the manor with her visualization magic and give out pertinent orders based on what was happening. But I was feeling like this was turning into a theater of a comedy movie.

"Hmm, I think we're starting to lose sight of our purpose here. But I guess it's fine if they're enjoying it." I scratched my head at the back of the manor. After last night's events, I spent plenty of time to work out a scenario before going to sleep. The plan was to scare the daylights out of Zarish, and things had been moving smoothly so far.

"Hee, hee, my sides...!"

"U-Um, Marie? What's going on inside the manor...?"

"Gahah, gahahah, wait a moment. I must drink some wine to calm myself before going on," Wridra's voice replied.

Come to think of it, we did get some as a reward for clearing the labyrinth floor.

That's weird... I don't remember getting any of it.

In any case, HQ seemed to be on the verge of collapse. This was all because Zarish's reactions were just too good.

Now, the scares we had pulled on him weren't all too complicated at this point. To explain them in chronological order, the massive murder of crows served Marie, the detection blockage and spy footage was Wridra's dragon magic, and we had insider info thanks to Eve. As for our final accomplice...

A woman emerged out of the wall. The semi-transparent woman was once the former second floor master. She shyly removed the mask she was wearing to reveal gentle-looking eyes and long lashes.

"Hey there, thanks for your help. It must have been rough waiting so long for him to go under the blankets, huh?"

Shirley shook her head. She removed a bit more of her mask to reveal her mouth, formed in a happy smile. She had taken on the role of scaring Zarish, but I was glad to see she didn't seem bothered by the task.

The sun had set pretty far already, and rain sprinkled down to soak my hair and skin even under the eaves. But considering this was in the dream world, I wasn't at all concerned. I sat down next to the woman in the white

dress and laid on my back. Maybe it was due to the weather, but her shoulder felt warm when we briefly made contact.

"I'm pretty ignorant when it comes to ghosts. Does it feel bad when people get scared of you?"

The pale woman cocked her head and considered my question. She remembered the events in the labyrinth and furrowed her brows in thought. She was originally a sort of supervisor of life, so maybe reaping souls was never part of her role. But it seemed she didn't dislike scaring people like this. Or maybe to her, this was her way of playing and having fun with others.

"I don't know why, but I was never scared of you even when we first met." I said so without really thinking about it. Shirley's sky-blue eyes widened, and then she bashfully hid half of her face with her mask. But there was such sincerity in her eyes that I could tell what she was thinking from them alone.

Then, I noticed her hair was still undone. This was part of her getup for scaring Zarish, and she even prepared fake blood with illusion magic to add to the effect. I reached out to tie her hair up for her, but my hands passed right through her. I had forgotten she was incorporeal. There was no way for me to physically interact with her.

"Oh, will you take me by the hand again? I'll tie your hair, then go scare him some more in soul form. Today is Sunday, so we'll have plenty of time to have some fun."

Shirley wasn't familiar with the term Sunday, but her eyes went wide at my suggestion for her to pull out my soul. She tentatively reached out her hand, then touched me with her soft fingertips. The strange thought of, "Maybe having my soul pulled out of me wouldn't be so bad if I could touch her like this," crossed my mind for a moment.

Anyway, it was time to get back to it. The horror show just for the hero candidate Zarish was about to resume. Oh, I wasn't accepting any payment. I just wanted to see everyone's happy faces.

§

Arilai, Zarish Manor, 21 o'clock—

The women spoke softly in hushed voices. The servants, also known as Zarish's collection, moved in closer to each other in the large, lamplit bedroom. The topic of discussion was, of course, their master, who had been acting strangely as of late.

"I wonder what's going on with Lord Zarish..."

"He seems afraid of something... I saw him put Puseri on watch in front of his door."

The women furrowed their brows in anxious expressions. Puseri was a Knight of the Black Rose and a powerful fighter that boasted the second-highest firepower and defense, next to Zarish. Not only was she an iron wall of defense, but her mounted charge upon her summoned beast could punch

a hole through any bulwark. Normally, using her to stand watch until morning would have been unthinkable.

"But you found nothing through your fortune telling, did you?"

"No, I didn't detect anything. I did go report as such to Lord Zarish, but he refused to step out of his room..."

They couldn't understand what he was afraid of when nothing was detected through precognition. But it was impossible for them to predict that the Arkdragon would have obstructed detection magic from being used at the manor.

They all looked at each other, and then they slowly turned toward the same direction. Their gazes fell upon an empty bed with flowers laid upon it. Evelyn, who went by Eve, was no longer there.

She was once mocked for having the lowest fighting abilities in the group, but no one expected to part ways with her in such a way. The thought of dying by getting impaled through the chest by one's own beloved master was a nightmarish concept.

"But you know... Wridra and Mariabelle, was it? If he's gonna get in contact with them again, he'd need to open another spot in his collection, right?"

"I-It's definitely going to be me... If my fortune telling is wrong this time..."

The oldest woman of the group walked up to the cowering fortune teller and held her against her ample breasts. The young resident of the sand dunes clung to the older woman and began crying out the tears she had been holding back.

The long, cold night was just beginning. At the very least, the woman had a warm bed to sleep in. Despite the late hour, a crow cawed atop the roof of the building. Its cries almost sounded empathetic.

§

I'm fine... I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm as calm as always, and there's nothing to fear.

Zarish muttered to himself at the side of his bed. His surroundings were lit with a pale blue light that was emitting a faint hum. This was his unique Primary Skill that provided protection from enemies.

This recently-acquired ability was known as Sealed Domain, which could designate a fixed area of absolute defense. It could prevent all sorts of damage and completely shut off the flow of information, making it useful for secret meetings with representatives of neighboring countries. He had never tried it before, but it would likely hold up against a hostile army, too.

There was no one who could defeat Zarish on land. Everyone knew this. But there he was, curled up on the ground, maintaining a defensive skill that could render military forces useless.

He glanced at his bed. The blankets had been peeled back, now completely free of blood. What he had seen earlier must have been an illusion. Yes, it had to be his mind playing tricks on him due to mental

fatigue. It wouldn't have made sense otherwise. His subordinate's fortune telling was extremely accurate, and it should have detected any intruder right away.

And so, he slowly rose. His bladder was reaching its limits from drinking too much, so he had to leave the room sooner rather than later. He really didn't want to. There was nothing he hated more than the idea of stepping foot out of his room right now. But there was no way he could allow himself to have an accident, so he sighed and stood to his feet. He deactivated his Sealed Domain and moved toward the door with uneasy steps.

His breath grew steadily rougher. On the other side of the door, Puseri the Knight of the Black Rose should have been waiting, as ordered. But would she still be there? Zarish hadn't heard a peep in quite some time, which was actually making him more nervous.

He touched the cold metal of the knob, then slowly pushed it downward. The door creaked open, letting the cold air from the hallway flow in and caress his cheek. Due to the humidity, it felt as if the air clung heavily around his neck.

There stood Puseri, standing completely still in the dark hallway. Her back was facing Zarish, and she slowly turned as he emerged. He could feel his heart beating harder from her dramatically slow movement.

"Ah, Lord Zarish. How are you feeling?" Her smile was almost motherly in nature, and he let out a deep sigh of relief.

Everything was fine. She was under his management due to his ring. Even if danger confronted him, she would have protected him with her life. This woman was far more trustworthy than some unreliable lover or friend.

He couldn't show any weakness due to his position, but it was too late for that after the shameful display from earlier. She had frantically burst through the door upon hearing him shriek like a girl... but he decided to forget about that.

"Come with me. I want to go to the restroom."

"Certainly, Lord Zarish." Her response swept away his anxiety.

It was a big relief to have someone walking with him. They proceeded down the hallway together, and by the time they entered the corridor with pillars lining one side instead of a wall, Zarish was feeling much more like himself.

On the other side of the roof, he could see the rainy night full of wet trees and grass. Among them, something covered in thorns happened to catch his eye.

"Black roses... Does it look like they will be blooming this year?"

"They will absorb plenty of water during this period and should bloom by the end of the rainy season. They had been wilting as buds without ever fully blooming, but this year, the manor would surely look splendid with..." Puseri stopped mid-sentence. Her memories beyond that point had been sealed away by Zarish. He had executed a trap for the household at this very manor on a day when the black roses were in full bloom. Many felt

malice for him due to the fall of the once-glorious house. He had invited them into the territory, and after all the bloodshed, he had cut everyone down in the end. All but that Knight of the Black Rose, Puseri.

Despite how gruesome that night was, it was that very night that he had acquired the high-quality piece to his collection. Zarish thought back to that time as he touched the bulbous rose bud. It was about the size of a head of garlic and surprisingly weighty from the rain water.

"Lord Zarish, it is forbidden at this manor to touch them before they bloom."

"...Ha." He crushed the bud in his fist. The bud was easily torn from its stem and fell upon the ground with a soft *plop*. Zarish grinned and turned around as if to declare that he was the master of this manor. Puseri looked at him without displaying any emotion, then wordlessly lowered her head. She knew that even showing any sorrow would be an act of disrespect.

But just then, a thought came across Zarish's mind. Perhaps the grudge and hatred of those he had cut down that day were still whirling about this manor. Well, that was no matter. At least, it wouldn't have bothered him normally, but his senses felt extra sensitive this night. And so, he voiced his concern in an unusual display of insecurity.

"By the way, are there any ghosts... I mean, ominous legends surrounding this manor?"

"Hm? Yes, I had been told of it when I was young, so I am certain I can meet your expectations in that regard."

Zarish twitched in response. Despite the dark subject at hand, Puseri's expression seemed strangely happy. Her twilight hair formed an arc as it swayed and enshrouded her cheek. Her wavy hair was entwined with her maid outfit, shoulders, and back... reminding him of black roses.

She reached her hand out into the rain. The mixture of sand and rain landed upon her maid outfit, leaving black spots upon her clothes. There was a strangely mystical aura about the speaker, and Zarish found himself listening intently.

"We of House Blackrose swear our loyalty only to our country. This is why our house words are 'We shall have no master.'"

Indeed, Zarish already knew this; it was exactly why he wanted to take her by force. They were an old-fashioned bloodline that ruled over this land since before the king's reign. The black knights were the ultimate fruits of their labor. But fruits were not something that should have been left on the tree to spoil. They were meant to be greedily picked from the branch.

"But as we pressed forward through our long history, a certain fool appeared to battle and rule over us. It was the current king. Now, what sort of conclusion do you think came of this?"

"...Who knows? Yours is a household with such old-fashioned house words. I doubt you bent the knee without a fight."

"Indeed," Puseri replied and nodded with a faint smile. She pointed ahead to indicate the black rose from earlier swaying in the rain. As Zarish stared, he heard her beautiful voice ringing in his ears.

"At the end of the battle of one thousand days, our house let a few of our bloodline flee, and everyone else ended their own lives. They sliced open their own necks and stomachs in that garden right over there."

Zarish could feel the chill of his own sweat. The sound of the rain grew more intense, and he looked down upon the bud he had crushed in his own hand earlier. It left a black stain in his hand, and the torn petal was like a piece of trash. Thunder crackled overhead, and his fingertips trembled in response.

"They say that the roses had turned black after drinking in so much of the blood of my ancestors. In the language of flowers, they mean... no, perhaps you shouldn't hear this."

There was something raw about the tone of her voice that made this all too real. And the dark twilight of her eyes seemed to have a glint of satisfaction in them. Maybe he was imagining it, but it was almost like she had obtained something horrible. He wondered what was going through Puseri's mind as she saw the expression on his face. She wore a faint smile as she lowered her arms in the rain.

"Therefore, you are the first one to claim this place as a master, Lord Zarish. Hehe, did my humble tale meet your expectations?"

"...Yeah."

Why? Why now?

I've lived here for three years. Why of all times was she telling me this story now...?

A streak of light flashed down from the sky, momentarily illuminating his pale face full of regret for having heard the story. Then, the sound of thunder rolled in from afar.

§

"Now, what to do...?"

I muttered to myself as I peeked out from one of the pillars lining the corridor, and a face full of curiosity turned to me. The vivid eyes reminded me of the blue sky despite the rain, and they seemed to help me forget about the incessant downpour. Though, I was in soul form, so the rain went right through me anyway. The sound of raindrops could be heard all around us as I turned back toward them.

The scenario was already starting to stray from our original plan. It seemed Zarish decided to have that woman accompany him, so there wasn't much opportunity for me to make a move. After all, I had no interest in scaring anyone but him.

Anyway, I couldn't help but notice how unsteady I felt without standing on my own two feet. Shirley was holding on to my shoulder, and when I turned around, I could see her clothes and both her feet floating behind us. It sort of felt like swimming in a pool. It did feel very ghost-like, but it was

quite a sight regardless. Just then, I heard a voice speaking in Mind Link Chat.

"Hmm, that's quite an interesting character."

"Oh, Marie. Did you guys finally recover over at HQ?" Marie, Wridra, and Eve were gathered at a spot near Zarish Manor and keeping an eye on things. They saw through the entire building and heard every word being spoken, thanks to magic.

"Yes, that was terrifyingly powerful. My sides still hurt so badly. I was afraid my abs would be destroyed. No wonder they call him the hero candidate," Marie said.

"I was dying on the floor laughing, too. This visualization magic stuff is pretty crazy. I feel like I could get addicted to this. Are you guys always doing fun stuff like this?" Eve asked.

"Actually, I did not realize how entertaining this magic could be. Perhaps I should work on refining it further. Now that my sweat has dried from all of that laughing, I would like to see what comedy scene awaits us next."

Huh, so the viewers were demanding more. Also, I could hear them munching on something... but they left some for me, too, right? Though, I was more focused on Marie's comment from earlier.

"When you mentioned an 'interesting character' earlier... Were you talking about Puseri?"

"Yes. There is always a core to any good story. We can't be content just giving him a few scares. This is the time for us to move on to the next step."

Ohh... She was starting to get pretty serious about this. I wasn't sure if I should've been happy about that, but I did kind of understand how she felt. She had been spending most of her time reading in the rain, and we even went to a giant theme park. It was no surprise that she had an eye for quality storytelling. And so, I wanted to give it my all to earn her seal of approval.

I heard Eve swallow something that might have been wine, and she raised her voice to join the conversation.

"Zarish's ring has a domination skill applied to it called Engagement. You won't be able to convince Puseri with it in effect. It steals her levels and free will, too."

Whoa, she just totally blurted out the secret behind his skill. But I couldn't really blame her. It was Zarish himself that released the ring from her, so I'd say it was karma.

"Hm... then I feel a bit bad for the ladies, but I'll have to take the aggressive route to gain their cooperation." I then turned to Shirley, whose sky-blue eyes blinked with confusion.

The pieces were all set, and now we only needed to weave the bloody tale of this manor. Once it was complete, it was sure to dig deep into Zarish's heart. And it would all have been recorded, of course.

I looked forward to the story to come, and Marie cracked her neck in anticipation.

Rain gently poured down in the dark, moonless night.

A handheld lamp lit the way instead, and Zarish pushed the heavy door open.

Bathrooms in the desert country could hardly have been called hygienic. Dried sand or pebbles were used to wipe in most of them. Water buckets were used to rinse off in this manor, which was considered better than most. Zarish sat with irritation upon the seat that had a long history here. The window was small, and no stars or the moon could be seen due to the rainy season. Only the lamp he placed at his side provided any light, and he let out a deep sigh as the sound of rain sputtered outside.

"Haah... Damn it!" The Knight of the Black Rose was standing guard on the other side of the door as he did his business. And so, there was nothing to fear... or so he thought. According to that strange legend he had heard earlier, the house words of this manor rejected Zarish as its master. Not only that, but it felt as if there were evil spirits or something floating about the place.

What a creepy place it was. He felt like there had been eyes upon him for some time, and maybe he was imagining it, but could even occasionally hear laughter.

"Have I really been living so carefree in a creepy place like this?" He uttered to no one in particular. He almost wanted to rebuild this place, and its legend along with it, but he didn't intend on using the manor for much longer. His plans had been making steady progress, and he was going to move somewhere else when the time came.

As he pictured his plans for the future, he heard a footstep crunching right on the other side of the door. He looked straight ahead with a dubious expression.

Thunk!

He twitched in reaction at the sound. Something hit the door pretty hard, and only his eyes darted around in the darkness. *What... What was that?* Perhaps someone had hit the door, or it could have been some sort of sign from Puseri. That was right... What was Puseri doing?

"Puseri... Hey, are you there?" She had to be. It would have been strange if she wasn't. Zarish had given her a direct order. She was to stand there and guard him. The ring took away her free will, so she couldn't leave her post no matter what. But he felt his heart beat faster when no response came.

Something was off. Something was happening. But he didn't know what. He wiped his forehead with one hand, which came away slick with sweat.

He let out a tense sigh, then heard a woman's voice echo in the room.

"Lord Zarish, hehe..."

"Oh, you're there. Goo—" He nearly let out a sigh of relief, then froze. Her voice had come from a place a lot lower than expected, like it was coming from the space under the door. His eyes moved downward, as if

drawn to the voice, then noticed something long and black crawling on the ground. It was a mass of something fibrous. He clutched his bone-dry throat and spoke with a hoarse voice.

"What... are you doing? Hey, what are you doing?!"

"What...?" She snickered. Then, her voice vanished.

The lamp was nearly out of oil, and the fire seemed like it could've faded any moment now. As he cowered in the dim lighting, he heard disturbing noises from all around him. It sounded like countless "somethings" were crawling around. He was desperate to know what they were, but it was too dark to see. Zarish swallowed hard, then gripped the fingers of both his hands.

He screamed internally. He wanted to shriek in fear and run away from this cramped, dark place. But because of all the alcohol he drank, he wasn't going to be ready to leave any time soon. In fact, his abdominals had tightened from fear, making his stream come out weaker and more strained.

"Haah...! Haah...! Haah...!" He breathed heavily, his greasy, sweat-soaked hands gripping his lamp as he pointed its weak light toward the ground. No, perhaps he shouldn't have looked. The light of his lamp trembled as an undulating mass of something black came crawling through the space under the door. What seemed to be black vines were countless strands of human hair.

Normally, he would have already been screaming. But his throat had tightened up so much that he could only scream with short, strained bursts of "*Ungh! Ungh! Ungh!*" Zarish grabbed the handrail with a white-knuckled grip as he pointed his lamp this way and that in a panic, then froze.

Under the door, a finger had emerged between all the hair. The finger was slim, and it was unclear whether it belonged to a man or woman. It slid right inside, followed by another finger. Two, three, and more appeared, squirming around under the door. Their numbers increased gradually, and a shiver ran down his spine at the sight of the space under the door being completely filled with them.

"Ungh, ungh, uuungh! Hmgh, hmph, hmmgh!" He breathed with shallow, tense breaths, and then a thought came to him. The window. He could escape through the window. Just as he turned to look, he saw that a pale face of a child was right in the space of the window.

"Nnwaaaaaaaah!!!"

He couldn't. He was done. He didn't even bother to pull his pants up as he unlocked the door in a panic, then pushed it with all his might. The door swung open without resistance, and Zarish rolled out into the hall in a heap.

A flash of light appeared, and it was as bright as mid-day in that moment. There, he saw a woman standing in the garden in the middle of the downpour. She stood there all alone, but her face was familiar. It was the last remaining survivor of the Knights of the Black Rose...

"Pu...seri...?" She stared at the ground, letting the rain wash over her.

It was an abnormal sight. A beautiful woman standing completely motionless in the rain, both arms hanging limply at her sides. Zarish felt his cheeks twitch involuntarily. He laid there on the ground with rain pouring onto his exposed buttocks and shivered. He stayed on the stone pavement and called out her name again with a pleading tone.

It seemed she had heard him this time... And he soon wished she hadn't. Her face snapped up with unnatural speed. Zarish let out a yelp of fear as he realized something was off about Puseri. She was wearing a mask with black blades protruding all over it, and he felt something warm flow out of him.

No, that was the least of his worries right now. The way she slowly lumbered toward him was far from her usual behavior. Her neck cracked as it turned sideways, and the way she reached for him as if she meant to tear his face off was nothing like the Puseri he knew. Just then, an arm emerged from the stone pavement, and he felt goosebumps erupt all over his body.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!"

He was so disturbed that he felt like flailing his limbs about uncontrollably. The hand that had touched him was slick and warm, like that of a human's, and it vanished when he swatted at it. But another one emerged from the ground immediately after, and he let out another shriek of fear.

Zarish leapt to his feet, then ran for his life as he desperately tried to pull his pants up. His pants were hard to lift from being so wet and heavy, so he had no choice but to limp away clumsily. Semi-transparent hands reached out and caressed him from behind, and the sensation of having his innards touched made his eyes roll back with horror.

Just then...

"Zari..."

The whisper in his ear came from somewhere much closer than the rain falling around him. His teeth clattered uncontrollably, and the last thing he wanted to do was look. But he couldn't help it.

The horrifying, rain-soaked, mask and Puseri's familiar voice made Zarish scream and run as fast as he could. He tripped several times and did a few flips as he sprinted into the corridor of the manor, then slammed the door shut behind him and locked it with trembling hands.

§

I wasn't all that familiar with horror myself, but I felt like I was getting the hang of the unique presentation methods of the genre. Though, I thought about how this knowledge really wouldn't have helped me in any other aspects of life as I watched Zarish flee into his manor.

"He's probably holding the door closed as hard as he can, so let's try an illusion of hair appearing under the door like earlier. We have to make sure they crawl around like living rose vines. If the presentation isn't properly fitting of the manor of black roses, a certain picky elf will voice her complaints."

I conveyed my message through Mind Link Chat, and Shirley raised both thumbs while having Puseri under her possession. Oh, that was a pretty charming gesture. Anyway, it was probably better for her to keep that mask on. Not being able to see her whole face made one's imagination work all the harder. It turned out that horror movie study groups were surprisingly useful.

Now, this raised an important aspect of horror movies: thematic consistency. The seed of hypotheses would be sown within the viewers... I mean, Zarish's mind by presenting similar illusions all over the place that were befitting of a cursed manor of black roses. What if the vengeful ghosts of this manor had a grudge against me? What if the Blackrose household was attacking me tonight? He wouldn't have been able to shake such questions from his mind.

Shirley pointed at the door, as if to signal that she was good to go. I raised both thumbs back at her. And so, moments later, I heard a voice shriek from the other side of the door. I could hear the ladies burst out in laughter through Mind Link Chat, along with cries of "His butt's showing!" Personally, it felt more like watching more of a comedy than a horror show.

I heard the sound of someone pounding on something from the inside, likely in an attempt to wake up the others. But they shouldn't have been interrupting people's sleep at such a late hour. Besides, providing a moment of temporary relief was an important part of setting up for the finale.

"Hmph, a toddler could execute such simple soundproofing magic."

"You took care of that quickly. Guess that's why you guys are manning the HQ."

The lady Arkdragon quickly took care of the noise problem, so the women were promised a good night's rest.

The lock opened with an audible click, and then the door slowly opened. A lock couldn't stop Shirley, since she could have just phased through matter, but it was customary to take one's time with this sort of presentation.

An unusual chill flowed through the opening and into the dark hallway ahead. The woman known as Puseri entered, her heel clicking against the floor as she stepped forward. She was a bit taller than me, and her undulating hair was the color of twilight, a shade that would have paired well with the morning star.

Her hair and clothes fluttered in the chill wind coming in from behind her, and I wondered how she was creating that cold air. But Shirley, who had possessed Puseri, turned to me and cocked her head as if to say she didn't know either. Maybe the elite lineup of Team Diamond all had special abilities of some sort.

In any case, the presentation was befitting of the grand finale. Our target was likely hiding somewhere in the dim, straight hallway ahead.

I whispered to Shirley via Mind Link Chat, "Would you mind singing with me? Marie and I came up with it earlier. I think it would be more fitting here if we're a bit out of tune."

It was a rather difficult request, but she responded with a small nod. And so, the sound of forlorn singing reverberated through the empty corridor.

"Someone is here. Someone is calling.

If you wander in the manor of black roses,

Stuff your mouth with dirt and make the flowers bloom."

We walked slowly as we repeated this song.

It shouldn't have bothered him too much at first. He was an adult, after all. A little song and a scary mood wouldn't have terrified him right away... but it began to creep in as it was repeated over and over. It made one imagine what would have been coming next, gradually making the fear grow deeper and deeper.

Right at the deep end of the hallway, where the thud had just come from, was likely where Zarish was trembling with his hands over his mouth. It was better not to find him right away. We walked away in the other direction instead. Waves of hair made disturbing slithering sounds as they extended outward and covered the walls like rose vines.

He would sense that the horrifying "something" was moving away from him during his state of distress. Then, when he saw that the door was still open, a faint hope of escape would grow inside of him. He would crawl toward the door and be relieved to make his way toward safety. Of course, we knew his exact position from the information Marie and the others were feeding us.

As Zarish crawled across the ground, something reached out and wrapped around his arm. It was a woman's black hair. Of course, the horror didn't just end there. His gaze followed the hair up to the ceiling to find something was waiting for him from above. There, in the darkest corner of the ceiling, the Knight of the Black Rose was staring directly at him as if he were prey.

"Ungh... Ah..." He couldn't even move a finger.

The knight descended to the floor like a predator, and Zarish could hardly draw breath as he considered what was to come. He had very few courses of action available to him, and now that he was reaching his mental limit, he could only utter in a trembling voice, "Sealed Domain."

The dim hallway was filled with a pale blue light, and the black hairs momentarily vanished from the territory in which only he could exist. It made no sound and only created a rather plain visual effect of white smoke, but it was intense enough to make even the second floor master take a step back.

So this was Sealed Domain. I had heard about it from HQ, but it was my first time actually seeing it. Supposedly, its defensive power was so absolute that even an army or a mob of monsters couldn't inflict a single scratch on it.

I watched from a distance and groaned. Things weren't panning out quite like they did in the movies. We were dealing with the hero candidate who had a skill that would completely protect him, after all. But this was quite impressive. His powers were enough to keep even the second floor master, Shirley, at bay. Relief came over Zarish as he smiled tensely and pointed his open right hand at her. I realized his intention soon after.

"Puseri, I order you. Protect me with your life." The Knight of the Black Rose recoiled as she was hit with an invisible force. Despite Shirley having possessed her, the power of the ring's domination was still in effect. Pushed back by an invisible pressure, her writhing, twilight hair began to settle down.

She looked at me as if to ask what she should do. Shirley may have been fine, but blood ran down her physical vessel's cheek. Blood was flowing from her twilight eyes, indicating that the situation had grown far more dire from our little pretend horror game. As I was about to call for retreat in a panic, I heard a woman's voice in my head.

"Make no mistake, Kitase. That is no unbeatable defense. If such a thing existed, it would defy the laws of nature. That which is created by man can be destroyed by man. Indeed, even by you."

As usual, the Arkdragon liked to speak in mysterious terms, as if she were some sort of prophet. I had the impression that the ancient being had a heart for romance more than any other.

I let out a deep breath. And yet, neither this nor Wridra's sage words helped in calming my irritation. I was feeling anger from this man who showed no concern over the pain he was causing and prioritized only himself just because he was afraid.

He called his precious teammates his "collection" and wasn't bothered by the thought of causing their deaths.

Is this how you killed Eve, Zarish?

If he ever got Mariabelle or Wridra on his side, would he have done the same thing to them? He would have murdered someone who was always laughing, loved spending time with her friends, and found such joy from simple things like taking baths?

An unfamiliar feeling was boiling up inside me. It was the horrible, horrible emotion known as hatred. By the time everyone had become students, they learned techniques to shelve this emotion away so they would have been able to grow up to be a respectable adult. But it continued to swell up within me. My fists tightened, hardly able to contain it.

I realized it was no use. I couldn't forgive him. No matter how much fear I struck into his heart, no matter how much we mocked and laughed at him, there was no sense of satisfaction. In fact, it had only served to reveal his true nature, further stoking the ugly feeling burning inside.

"Why make such a face? Tonight is the night of our wonderful horror party. I shall lend you my power, Kitase. I will nullify his defense just this

once. Keep your wits about you, and burn what lies ahead into your memory."

There was no time to even think about it. The next moment, it vanished into thin air. The Sealed Domain that seemed so unstoppable blew away in the wind as if it was an illusion.

It wasn't me who was most surprised by this but Zarish. He let out a dull-witted "Huh?" and waved his arms around uselessly. Then his eyes bulged at the sight of all the hair wrapping around his arms. Countless strands of hair were entangled around his trembling fingers, and Puseri's horrifying visage immediately came closer as she shuffled up to him with inhuman speed.

All he could do was scream.

The high-pitched shriek echoed throughout the manor of black roses.

Chapter of Slavery, Episode 11: Overload

I looked up at the sky as it grew lighter. The river had turned brown in the rainy season, and it churned loudly with its water level having risen up to the rock I was sitting on. It was flowing with much more intensity than usual, and much of the riverbed had been swallowed by the turbid waters.

I glanced over to see the unconscious Zarish laying in the shade of a rock. He must have had quite a traumatizing experience, considering there wasn't a single wound on him despite his pale face. Judging by the way he was groaning, he wasn't having a very good dream. It was about six in the evening in Japan by now. As the thought crossed my mind, a voice spoke to me via Mind Link Chat.

"Hm, it appears you have been thinking of this since the beginning." The draconian didn't sound sleepy despite it being dawn already. In fact, there was a gentle, motherly tone in her voice. I felt the fingers around the hilt of my sword tremble slightly at her words.

"I guess nothing gets by you, Wridra. Are the other two asleep?"

"...Indeed. They look quite peaceful. They have been boisterous so late in the night. Hah, hah, their slumbering faces are beginning to make me sleepy myself." I let out a sigh of relief. I didn't want them to see what I was about to do.

"You have the voice of a man. I thought of you as a runt, but you have grown to be so reliable before I knew it."

"It's not like that. It turns out I have a short temper. You never know what a guy like me will do in a fit of rage." The dragon chuckled, and then we both exhaled at the same time. Our early-morning sigh sounded exactly alike despite the distance between us. She was likely looking up at the white sky along with me. Maybe that was why my next words for her were so full of honesty.

"Thank you, Wridra. For not getting in between me and Zarish that day."

"I am not keen on the subtleties of human interactions. I merely thought it was a necessary ordeal for you to go through. Though, it was out of intuition rather than any logic on my part." I truly appreciated it. Had I let him be back then, I probably would have regretted it even now, even as we were out having fun or doing anything else. And even if Wridra had defeated him for me, it still would have stuck with me. The shame of pushing all of the dirty work onto her would have stayed with me the entire time.

So this stage was for me. Maybe what I was about to do was just cruelty for the sake of my own satisfaction. But there was no way I could've turned back now.

I placed my hand on the hilt of my sword once again. I set my resolve to end his life once and for all. I slowly drew my sword from its sheath, watching his unconscious face in silence.

"...I have an interesting tidbit for you. They say that there is actually only one condition for a male and female to become a pair." The fingers around my weapon loosened. My narrow field of view widened again from her words, and I pictured the dragon in my mind as I replied.

"To become a pair? Do you mean the male has to prove his strength or something?"

"No, not that. It is to make the female think she would be fine with dying." My curiosity grew upon hearing this. At that moment, I thought about Mariabelle, for some reason.

The half-fairy elf was always so adorable, and I thought about how she leaned against me for warmth when reading books. Her light body pressing against mine always filled my heart, whether I was in Japan or the dream world. Wridra continued on with a gentle tone.

"There is danger in giving birth to a child. That is why a female must think it is worth dying with her partner before the two can truly become a pair."

"So you're saying I'm not the one who decides. That's kind of a weight off my shoulders, actually." We laughed. It was just as it always was. My path was always decided by Marie's curiosity, and she held my hand by her whim. I suddenly remembered something then, and I looked up at the sky again as I asked another question.

"Wridra, remember what you told me at the theme park that day? You said, 'The thoughts of evil men will eventually manifest themselves in your mind without you realizing it.' I think I finally understand what you meant by that."

Powerful and evil men like him always handled things in highly straightforward ways. I, too, was trying to resolve this issue at its root by taking the life of an unconscious person. This was, indeed, the efficient way to go. But this decision was brought on by my own weakness. Otherwise, I could have chosen another way, like challenging him to a duel.

"Wridra, don't tell me you believe I could beat him in a fair duel?"

"I do not like to describe it as 'belief.' It may sound nice, but I do not operate on blind belief. I simply wish for it to become true, child of man."

For some reason, I was moved. We may have been far apart, but I felt my mentor's words in my heart, and I put my sword back in its sheath.

In order to live on without shame, to continue to hold Marie's hand, and to keep my promise with Eve to resolve this with as little violence as possible, I decided to keep my hands clean of blood.

§

As the sky turned into a lighter shade, the man groaned. I watched him sit up, then spoke to him with a quiet voice.

"Finally awake, Zarish? I hope you enjoyed your night of terror."

“...”

His face turned into a scowl for just a moment, and then he massaged his brows. His body must have been exhausted from all of the extreme fear and tension, but it shouldn't have affected his overall fighting prowess by much. He was known as the hero candidate, after all.

“Damn you... Where is this...?!”

“Some place pretty far from the manor of black roses. It's not so far that you can't walk back, though.”

He scanned his surroundings to make sure no one else was hiding somewhere. Of course, I was the only one here. Marie and Eve were sound asleep, and I had prepared this place on my own by using Trayn, the Journey's Guide, my movement skill that could only be used once a day.

Zarish reached for his waist and was surprised to find his sword was still there. He was right to be surprised. Considering how he had been unconscious, I could have killed him at any time. While he processed his shock, I quietly spoke to him again.

“I could have ended this after we had our little fun, but it turns out I can't ignore my hatred toward you.”

“Hatred? What, for killing you?”

No, I wouldn't have hated him just for that. After all, I'd been killed by most of the women I knew, and I didn't know how many times I'd been dissolved by those slime-looking things when I was younger. He could tell what I was thinking just by looking at my face.

“I guess I'm just as much of a kid as I appear. Because you tried to lay your hands on Mariabelle and for all that you've done to the many women around you... I'm angry, as rare as that is.”

A wide grin spread across Zarish's face. As a man who had always taken whatever he wanted, he probably dealt with many people like me. And so, he was probably thinking, “This again?” This was far, far easier for him to understand than the pranks from last night, and the fear inside him began to dissipate. After all, his opponent was the boy who he had stabbed through the heart just a day ago.

“I want to protect the woman who's precious to me. I won't let you make her cry like you did to the women around you... Though, I can't help it sounding so cheesy when I say it out loud.”

“Hah, you're a lot simpler to understand now that you're back in the flesh. Well, I'm a man who takes what he wants. You can give up hope until the day I die of old age, Phantom.”

Our fun little horror party came to an end, and I now faced a monstrous opponent with sword in hand. This was for the sake of my own ego, and what the Arkdragon had wanted.

His eyes glinted in the light of dawn like that of a beast, and his murderous intensity made my instincts scream “Run away.” But this was the man who plotted to put Mariabelle through hell. I had to end his journey here and now. I set my resolve to give him no mercy.

My heart pounded in my chest.

It wasn't that I was afraid of the horrible opponent before me.

A feeling that even I couldn't understand was deep within me, and I felt like it was taking shape and becoming real in this battle. Whatever it was, I had a feeling this molten "something" inside me was about to be born into this world.

§

Large beads of water came down from the sky, eventually turning into steady rainfall. There stretched a vast expanse of deep brown sand dunes, and more and more greenery could be seen some distance away toward the riverbed. The birds had just awakened with the morning sun, and they flew off to find some fruits and bugs to fuel them for the day.

A metallic clash rang out through the quiet morning. The clang of steel on steel could be heard, followed by the sound of metal grinding against itself. If people or monsters had been around, they likely would have fled out of instinctive fear. There was just that much malice behind the noise.

Eventually, silence fell once again, and there stood a man at the riverbed looking up at the sky by himself. It was Zarish the hero candidate, his blond, rain-soaked hair swaying in the wind. He stood with his sword drawn out of its sheath, its blade slick with blood.

Zarish sighed and returned his sword to his waist without cleaning it, then began walking toward a footpath away from the riverbed. The birds fled from the smell of blood permeating from him, and he pushed the branches away as he stepped onto the footpath that had been created by animals. Just then, someone appeared next to him.

"Hey there, you're looking a little pale, Zarie."

"...Ngh!" Zarish groaned at the sudden cheery voice that called out to him. He looked over to find the boy sitting up to the side of the footpath, as if he had just awakened from a nap. They were fighting to the death just moments ago, and there he was, as if nothing happened. Zarish's head swayed back, and when he faced forward again, his expression was filled with intense confusion and rage.

"...Th-That's enough! Just how many times do you need to die before you go away, damn it?!?"

The air around him trembled as he shouted furiously, but the boy was unfazed. In fact, he looked downright sleepy as he moved closer. The casual manner in which he walked, almost as if he was going for a morning stroll, further stoked Zarish's fury.

"Who knows? It's only been four times. Why don't you see for yourself if there's a limit?"

"Fine, then! Die, you little shit!!!" Zarish's blade rang against its sheath as his sword flew faster than the speed of sound. But as he unleashed the ferocious attack, the boy suddenly vanished. However, it was no illusion. The boy had teleported to a position out of the blade's reach.

Again! Whenever I use an attack, this brat dodges it the next time I use it! Zarish gritted his teeth as he thought to himself. His swing had missed its target entirely and landed on a large tree nearby, causing it to shatter into splinters. But in that moment, Zarish couldn't move from his position after taking his swing. The boy had reappeared at his flank before he knew it, but he only showed an eerie smile without delivering an attack of his own.

"Wow, that's pretty neat. All your attacks are faster than the speed of sound. That's an impressive Primary Skill, Zarie. I'm really jealous."

"...Ngh!" Zarish turned red with anger. Not only was the boy annoyingly insolent, but he immediately returned even after getting cut to shreds.

The boy was still beneath him. There were countless others who were at his skill level... but he was starting to evade more and more of Zarish's attacks, proving that he was unnaturally quick to learn and adapt. Realizing the boy was getting closer and closer to his own level, the hero candidate was becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

"You think you can laugh at me, you little shit?!" And so, Zarish activated his trump card: The Divine Finger. He pointed his right hand at the boy, then pointed his pinky slightly upward to make him freeze in place. Not only did this ability disable the target's ability to move about freely, but it also bent the laws of physics. Making a stone float was a simple task, and it was unbeatable in a fight with another swordsman like this.

The boy was stuck floating in mid-air, rendering him unable to teleport anymore. Zarish slammed the boy against a big tree, causing blood to spurt out and paint the surrounding leaves red. The boy was left battered and bruised after repeating this process several times, but instead of the expected look of fear, the boy flashed a tenacious smile.

"Ohh, so that's the move you were using on Marie. Too bad you won't be able to use it again. Don't worry, I'll memorize this one, too."

"Aaargh! Damn you! Die! Just die already!" The boy was slammed hard on his head, and he moved no more. Zarish breathed heavily, still as tense as if he was in the middle of combat. As he looked around nervously, the boy's body faded into thin air.



§

I woke up in the bed of my condo, then glanced at the dark window.

It was already eight o'clock at night, which meant I usually would have been having a nice dinner with everyone right about now. But tonight, I had something to take care of. I had the important mission of stopping the hero candidate, Zarish, by my own hands.

I flipped the light switch for the indirect lighting and rose from my bed. My throat was parched from the drawn-out fighting, and my body sought refreshment from the barley tea in the fridge. I wanted to eat right about now, but I decided I could have scared him some more by returning quickly and decided against it. And so, I unwrapped a piece of chocolate and tossed it into my mouth instead.

I savored the piece of chocolate in my mouth as I pondered. Zarish was indeed powerful, far more powerful than I had even imagined. I was no slouch myself, but he had killed me five times already. Although I had some defensive countermeasures at my disposal, I couldn't imagine how I could beat him.

I poured a cup of barley tea and took a swig. It felt good in my heated body, and I exhaled from the sweetness of the chocolate melting in my mouth.

"I need to come up with something. Some sort of attack that could take him down..." I muttered to myself with the cup still in hand. My Reprisal skill was set with evasive maneuvers, and there were very few open slots left. But each of Zarish's attacks were so powerful that they could have ended me in one hit, so it wasn't like I had much of a choice.

"All right, I'll have to deal with the stuff that I might be able to dodge manually. The problem now is my own lack of firepower." According to my observations and what Eve had told me, Zarish had the following skills.

- Bends the laws of physics (Divine Finger)
- Attacks faster than the speed of sound (Spectral Sword of Light)
- Automatically counters any attack slower than the speed of sound (Shield of Seeking Silence)
- Creates a barrier that completely blocks off the surrounding area (Sealed Domain)
- Increases firepower after each attack lands (King of Cruelty)

And finally, his rings. In fact, his rings were the biggest problem of all. They had the ability to turn their target into a slave, seizing their free will along with their levels. I carried him to a place far away so the ladies couldn't have come to his rescue, but their boss was so powerful already that it hadn't seemed to make much of a difference.

Now that I had faced him head on, it became painfully clear how powerful each of his skills were and just how hard it was to catch such a high-level opponent off guard. The skill that automatically delivered counterattacks was particularly annoying to deal with, since I could end up

on the losing end if I didn't fully commit to an attack. That was why I could've only taunted him without attacking in the previous round.

I quickly discarded the question of whether I could beat him or not. Now that I had set my resolve to defeating him, I had to focus on that singular task. I wished I could've said I was fighting him fair and square, but having infinite lives could've been considered cheating. The *thunk* as I placed the empty cup in the sink rang out in the silent room.

"Hmm, this is gonna be a long fight. I'll keep at it until the morning." I clenched my fist in front of me and headed back to my bed to fight a man who had a 60+ level advantage over me.

I awakened in the woods and found myself alone again.

The trees in the desert country had a distinctness to them. They were similar to palm trees, but their trunks were as thick as trees that were several hundred years old. There were gnarled humps growing all over the place, and I observed the brown, scale-shaped patterns with great interest as I followed Zarish's footprints.

It had become much brighter compared to when we started our duel, and I could tell it was going to be a hot day from the shape of the scattered rain clouds. Soon after, a glimpse of Zarish from behind came into view.

He hadn't seen me yet, so I wondered what to do next.

Even if I teleported and ambushed him right away, the automatic counterattack would've killed me right afterwards. I could've used the beam attack from my Astroblade, but I doubted it would've hit the target from this distance. The only way to prevent the counterattack from triggering was to attack faster than the speed of sound, which I couldn't do.

"Hmm, maybe I could charge up Astroblade as I teleport and fire it from close range... but then my teleportation would become unstable..." My short-distance teleportation skill, Over the Road, came with many limitations. Its weight restriction was particularly strict, and I had no idea where I would end up if I teleported while power was being charged into my blade. I may be able to get close enough by teleporting several times, but I had to figure out how to deal with the immediate and automatic counterattack right afterwards, or I would end up dead soon after.

"Oh, what if I attack and teleport away before the counterattack? I did memorize the timing with Reprisal earlier... Though, I guess I won't know until I try it." I decided to go ahead and set it into a Reprisal slot. Being able to learn through trial and error was one of my strong points, after all.

Attack and teleport at the same time, then evade with another teleport... It was difficult just picturing it. I stepped through the rough sand as I solidified the image in my head, then entered the complex movement patterns into my Reprisal skill. Loading these patterns into a slot usually took no time at all, but the combination of movements was taking some time to process. After several seconds of lag, the pattern was accepted into Reprisal.

"All right, no time for rehearsals. Let's do this. Here goes nothing!"

The view around me distorted, and then Zarish's shocked face in the distance appeared right in front of me... Then, I heard a metallic clash, and I was surprised to find myself flung into the sky.

"Whaaaaaat?!"

I flailed about in the air, then landed on my hip onto the rain-hardened sand. I endured the dull pain as I quickly rose and scanned my surroundings, then found Zarish watching me from afar. Judging from his distance and position, he must have moved there immediately after attacking.

I guess I got hit by his automatic counterattack. That must've been what sent me off course. But it only grazed me, so I was able to dodge most of it. There was a cut running through my clothes under my armpit with blood seeping through. I had to speed up the timing a bit more. I reconfigured the image in my head and modified my attack to a thrust to keep the range of motion as tight as possible.

This was completely unfamiliar territory for me. It felt like I was straying pretty far from the act of swinging my sword and defeating him that I had imagined originally. Though, it would be difficult to put up a fight against him without using some sort of unconventional fighting method.

"Okay, attempt number two... Here we go!" I immediately closed the distance between us. A metallic *clang* rang out behind me, and I nailed the landing this time. I drew a long line in my wake and turned around to find Zarish holding his sword up far away.

Hmm, so this was about the right distance. By the looks of it, I didn't hurt him much at all. In game terms, this would've probably been worth about 1 damage.

Just then, I noticed Zarish was shouting something from over where he was. He seemed to be complaining about me wasting my time and calling me an insect, which wasn't information that was all too useful, so I decided to ignore it.

"All right, then let's try increasing the number of attacks a bit."

Maybe I could optimize my evasion and attacks by dealing smaller bits of damage while constantly moving clockwise around him. I would move to a spot that wouldn't get hit by his counterattacks as I attacked and evaded, attacked and evaded. I could even activate Acceleration immediately after teleporting. This would slow the passage of time for me, which would allow me to easily deal with the condition of having the destination of movement within sight. It would remove the need to escape far away after each attack and make it easier to dodge.

"Yeah, I'll try that. Okay, time for round three." My view spun around as sparks flew and the sound of clashing blades filled the area.

I moved in a circle with Zarish at the center, delivering eight consecutive strikes. I had never teleported so quickly and accurately as this before, and my vision was in complete chaos with less than a second between each shift. My view looked like it had been animated with a low

budget, and I was hit with a wave of dizziness that made me reel back as soon as I landed in my original position.

Meanwhile, Zarish swung his sword at nothing but air. There was a cut in his clothes, but he must have blocked it right before it reached his flesh. Well, I hardly had the mental capacity to even laugh about that.

Urgh, I feel sick... My head was swimming, and my heart was beating erratically. Maybe I just needed to get used to it. I remembered going through similar symptoms when I first learned how to teleport.

In any case, the main problem was still the fact that I was lacking firepower. At this rate, I could've swung at him all day and still only managed to mildly annoy him. My vitality would've reached its limit before I could've ever hoped to defeat him.

"I really need to use Astroblade's ability to the fullest." Astroblade, the sword of stardust, could unleash a powerful blast of energy by charging it up through multiple levels. But due to the force field generated by its power, even I couldn't predict how it would affect Over the Road.

So what if I kept the energy charge to a minimum? I could contain its effect as much as possible while moving around, then unleash it as soon as it became full.

I got right to it and took Astroblade in hand, then charged it up to the minimum power level. It made a noise like a horse's whinny, and when I unleashed it, it fired something the size of a pebble deep into the ground and sprayed sand everywhere. It could've probably punched a hole through thin sheet metal, at best.

"Hmm, can I pull it off? Attack and defend at the same time, and fire it as soon as it's charged. All these patterns won't fit in Reprisal... Maybe if I separate them and... Oh, it fits." I used one set for movement and attack, then another set for Astroblade's charge attack. I had never set such intricate movement patterns like this before, so I had no idea how it would've turned out. This was getting so complex that I didn't really want to think about it anymore. *Come on, me. Show some effort once in a while.*

Zarish watched me with a puzzled expression, but seemed to sense something and raised his ornate sword. He didn't raise his barrier of perfect defense, likely because he wouldn't be able to attack at the same time. To be honest, that was the most troublesome skill to deal with, but luckily for me, his pride was getting in the way of its usage.

"All right, let's try this again. Attack number four... Here we go." I felt an awkward sensation, as if I were sliding sideways, and my teleportation ended up short of Zarish. The force field generated by Astroblade was affecting my control, as I suspected. Not letting that deter me, I leaped forward with my sword still aimed at the target. I had to repeatedly and unintentionally teleport to the left and right, but I gradually made my way toward Zarish. Maybe my movements were creepy from his point of view.

Clang! Astroblade's projectile attack was unleashed automatically, likely because my Reprisal skill had determined it was ready to fire and likely to

hit the target. Zarish's sword deflected the attack as if it was nothing, but I closed in on the monstrous opponent anyway.

Crk! I circled around him to evade the automatic counter, and then I unconsciously activated Astroblade's lowest charge attack. The projectile was fired from a mere thirty centimeters away, and even Zarish's eyes widened with surprise. The attack was faster than the speed of sound. Zarish deflected the speeding piece of stardust with godly speed, which created a small opening.

I felt like my brain would overheat as it processed my complex actions and repeated the cycle of teleporting and attacking over and over. The tip of my sword surrounded my foe like peculiar petals of a flower, and the occasional blasts of stardust provided a nice accent to the battle. After doing two or three rounds after running out of oxygen, I finally retreated from the battlefield.

Then, I fell to my knees.

"...Ngh!" Having reached my physical and mental limits from using my skills so many times in such a short period, sweat poured from my body like a waterfall. More importantly, I noticed strange signals being emitted from my nearly melted brain. Whatever it was beeped incessantly, which I assumed to be coming from a headache at first. But then I saw that the bracelet around my wrist was blinking and sending me an alert.

"Would you like to fuse Over the Road and Reprisal?"

I felt my heart skip a beat. At the same time, I thought this was my chance.

When trying out new paths through trial and error, there were extremely rare times when skills would transform like this. I had experienced it before, but never had I been prompted to fuse two Primary Skills together. There was a chance that it could backfire, and there was no turning back once the decision was made. If it ended up being useless, I would be wasting two valuable Primary Skills for nothing.

"Well... this is the only chance I have anyway. Of course I'll accept." As soon as I responded, a strange sensation ran through me. It felt as if something important had been extracted and mixed together inside me. I let out a sigh. Heat was expelled from my body, and I felt as if I could breathe fire.

My vision wavered like a heat haze. Zarish must have sensed something, because he came dashing right for me. Pillars of sand erupted in his wake, his raised sword like a speeding arrow, quickly closing the distance. Unfortunately for me, I couldn't move. Fusing skills wasn't something that was normally done in the midst of battle. I watched him gaining on me, and all I could do was wait.

I let out another hot breath. I could even hear the sound of change and a wall before me breaking down, like a cracking egg shell. Then, a voice of indiscernible gender rang out in my mind.

"Your skills have been fused, and you have acquired Overload." My brain felt a shock at the weight of something being dumped into my body. There, I felt a power greater than what I had lost.

What is this? What power lies hidden within? I had many questions, but now that I was at my limit, all I could do was find out the true nature of this skill for myself. The moment Zarish's blade was about to sink straight into my heart, my eyes shot wide open.

§

A herd of about twenty animals were slowly moving along the river together.

They were quadrupeds known as nuus, and they were herbivores fit for the desert environment they inhabited. With their thin legs and gourd-like build, they had a rather strange-looking anatomy, but they boasted a sense of smell that was several thousand times superior to that of a human's. This allowed them to detect predators right away, but they were odd creatures that were extremely slow when it came to running. It was said that even as they were eaten alive, they would cry out, "Nuu," as if they had given up.

The nuus continued moving along the path by the river with their usual slow pace.

Tch, tch, tch.

A sun-tanned child wearing a round hat urged them forward from behind. Perhaps the white-haired man some distance behind him was his grandfather.

Once the herders ensured their nuus got enough nutrition and were properly fattened up for the coming rainy season, they would have much to do upon returning to their village.

They moved between the interspersed grassy areas, so it would take at least half a year before they arrived at the kingdom. But nuus were an important source of protein, and they could turn a hefty profit. This made bandit attacks all the more likely, and despite being under the kingdom's governance, herders were still under the risk of losing their lives on the job.

Herbivores tended to travel in packs. Doing so made it easier to birth and raise children while also making it less likely for the individual animal to get attacked. Many considered it to be a way of life for the weak, but this could have been said for the nuu herders themselves, as well. By Arilai's rather cruel calculations, they only needed 80% of the herders to come back alive to make the endeavor worth it.

But now that they were this close to the royal capital, they were unlikely to get attacked. Sensing that they would be safe for another year, the boy and grandfather shook their sticks with light footsteps.

Just then, the boy noticed one of the nuus had strayed from the herd and wasn't moving. The timid creatures preferred to stick with the group, so it was highly unusual for one of them to be alone atop such a conspicuous hill. Perhaps it was a particularly curious nuu.

"What are you doing?"

The creature seemed to have heard the boy's question and waved its little tail side to side with its back still towards him. The tail was only as long as the palm of a hand, so each swing was rather small.

The boy huffed and slowly made his way up the hill. The riverside path was lined with palm-like trees draining water from the ground. The boy looked up at its burnt brown, scale-like patterns and slapped the nuu's rear with his stick as soon as he caught up. But his eyes widened in surprise when the creature didn't even flinch.

With his hand on the nuu's head, the boy looked in the same direction. Then, he noticed the strange sight in the distance at the path by the river. There stood a man holding up a sword with sparks and the sound of clashing metal whirling around him. The boy stood agape at the shocking sight.

"Whoa! The heck is that?!"

"Nuu."

The young nuu herder didn't know that this was the duel between the hero candidate and Phantom.

§

When there was a 60 level difference, I could have easily gotten a chunk carved out of me just from being grazed by my opponent's sword point. The only thing I had to worry about was whether or not such a wound was fatal. The blade sank a mere centimeter into the spot where my heart was, but I immediately teleported away, causing it to leave a cut in a horizontal line. Blood spurted out, followed by a sharp pain. Then, his blue eyes tracking me came into view. Time moved at a crawl, and it seemed I had activated Acceleration out of instinct.

Blinking at the edge of my vision was the name of the skill I had just acquired. I had no idea what this skill was, and I had to figure it out for myself and start from a blank slate... but at the same time, I was elated. This was an opportunity to use a brand-new skill against an opponent I was furious with. How wonderful it was that I didn't have to hold back.

Anyway, just what was this Overload? I didn't understand how it was different from Over the Road. The names were similar, but they were quite different in meaning.

Vwoom! Zarish's sword swept by over my head, sending out a shockwave surpassing the speed of sound. His sword was fast. The way it changed trajectory after a full swing without losing its momentum was nothing short of astonishing. If I'd have blocked it with my own sword, it would've left my hand unusable for some time.

I moved only my upper body and continuously evaded the incoming attacks, and I was surprised to find that the slots set in Reprisal were still in effect. I thought Reprisal had been merged into Overload...

"That must mean it evolved with this fusion."

"What?! Stop muttering to yourself while dodging my attacks, you creepy brat!" Zarish bared his teeth in front of me with murderous,

uninhibited rage. His body seemed greater in size from his intensity, and the flurry of his blade brought on a sense of despair. And yet, I had no fear of the death looming before me. I trusted that my movements were still slotted and teleported without panic.

Clang, clang, clash!

"Whoa," I said in surprise. I went around in a full circle, then backed off after going around another half circle. The extreme fatigue on my brain from trying to process my moves was now gone.

"Ah, it must have optimized the parallel processing somehow. Incredible... I've never heard of such a thing."

Blood seeped out of my chest, telling me that I didn't have much time left. It was a bad habit of mine to speak with such aloofness despite the gravity of the situation. But really, it wasn't only during the accounting period when the company decided my bonus that I wore a serious expression on my face.

Now, this was my theory.

Up until just recently, I was using my two skills, Over the Road and Reprisal, to automatically execute my attacks. But due to abusing them outside of their original intended purposes, it was greatly taxing on my mind and body, and it was made painfully clear how difficult it was to control.

It seemed like this newly-acquired Overload had merged my skills to optimize this process, allowing me to accomplish what I wanted to do. Maybe this meant I would be able to do what I couldn't before: charge Astroblade to full power and fire it at point-blank range. Astroblade's firepower could have been greatly heightened by absorbing energy. Maybe an attack akin to a colliding meteorite would've been able to defeat even Zarish... maybe.

But there were many issues facing me. First, considering the amount of vitality I had left, I only had one full-powered shot left in me.

Next, if I charged up Astroblade more, there was a greater startup time before I could fire, leaving a wide opening. The hero candidate could evade such a delayed attack with ease. And any attack slower than the speed of sound would've been countered automatically. Not to mention, he had that pesky barrier to protect him.

Now, how was I going to make sure I could hit my target? I probably would have given up by now under normal circumstances. But after spending a whole night tormenting Zarish, I had come to figure out how he thought, acted, and desired. So maybe I could take advantage of that and nudge him in the right direction to make him do what I wanted. And so, I decided to use my words as a weapon rather than my sword.

"You really are a coward, aren't you, Zarish? I can't help but worry that you're gonna pee your pants again." I could hear the sound of his teeth grinding from here. Unbridled fury could be seen on the great future hero's face. That wasn't very gallant of him.

“Hah, trying to provoke me, brat?! I...”

“So you defected to the neighboring country of Gedovar, huh? You seem to be trying to keep it a secret, but you shouldn’t have let me find out. I mean, you can’t kill me no matter how many times you try. What if I tell Sir Hakam and Great Aja about this?”

The moment the words left my mouth, rage erupted from Zarish’s entire being. He must have never had anything stand in his path like this before. His was the face of a child who had always whined to get everything he wanted.

“You want your own country? That’s hilarious. I figure you’re hoping to get one as compensation for destroying Arilai, but... you should probably reconsider. Can you really handle investing in things like tax revenue management, commercial development, military defense, facility installation, disease prevention, sanitary management, and magic development?”

I went on without giving him a chance to respond and watched as his face grew dark. As soon as he opened his mouth to give a retort, I went on further.

“Oh, you’re going to leave it to someone else to handle? Are you sure about that? If you let everyone else handle the real work, why would they need you? No one will consider you a king if you give all your authority to others. You really think you’re up for this?”

“Aaaaaaargh! Shut uuuuuup!!!”

Good, he came charging right at me. It seemed he was very easy to manipulate, and there were several things I’d figured out through both this battle and the night of horror.

“I’ll say it again: you’re a coward, Zarish. All of your techniques are designed to protect yourself. They’re for making others do your bidding. And such skills can only be activated from close range, so you need to run to your target like this.” I teleported backward right before he reached my position. The surrounding trees grew more sparse, and soon there would only be sand dunes around us.

I could hear shouts of *“I’ll kill you!”* and *“You’re the coward!”* from a distance, and I couldn’t help but pity his meager vocabulary. He was going to have to get a little more creative, unless his goal was to make me yawn.

“Oh, Eve is doing fine, by the way. Isn’t that nice? That’s one more person who can testify against you.” Even though Zarish was a quick runner, his speed suffered from climbing the sand dunes. I crouched and recovered my energy as I looked down at him.

“Are you okay, o great future hero? If you can’t make it up here, I could come down and get you.”

“Aaaaaaaargh! I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, damn it!”

Sand flew into the air behind him as he climbed with an agility befitting of someone with an estimated level of 140—no, now that he wasn’t wearing Eve’s ring, he was probably more like 135 or so.

Another burst of sand erupted behind Zarish, and he leaped high into the air. His pace had been slowing earlier, but it seemed he had just gone around me in an attempt to outmaneuver me and cut off my escape route. He exhaled deeply, and then his rough breathing settled down into a more relaxed pace. Apparently, his exhausted expression was an act. It was... quite a cute little plan on his part, I guess.

"Phantom, I'm going to capture you alive and torture you for all eternity. First, I'll cut up both of your legs."

"Oh, did you finally catch on? You made it really easy for me by killing me each time."

In contrast to Zarish's growing rage, I felt serene as I watched the sand dunes around us. Perhaps the rainy season was behind us. The rain had weakened considerably, revealing the blackened sand dunes. Maybe the little plants that could be spotted here and there were just going to wither. No, they would've surely spread their seeds again for this time next year. Then, they would wait for the season when the rain would bless them with water once again.

Suddenly, we clashed. Sparks flew between us, and Zarish's automatic counterattack struck at my blows and Phantom Image. This was quite interesting. It felt as if the pages of his predetermined script were turning one at a time.

My blade struck at him head-on again with a *clash*. This would be my final attack. There was no need to conserve my energy now, so I would go all out.

I attacked and teleported once again, and Zarish furrowed his brows.

It seemed he was taken aback by the sound of Astroblade, which sounded like the whinny of a horse, and the fact that I was able to activate it immediately, unlike before.

"You little...!"

"Now, how much do you think I can charge this up?" I circled around him as we clashed blades, but my attacks were meant to buy time and apply pressure rather than deal damage.

Whirrrr... Astroblade greedily absorbed my energy, its sound changing to something more akin to a flying meteor. I didn't let my mocking smile waver, but I had to admit, I was starting to worry about how much it was draining out of me. If only it was a gentler weapon that would go easier on me.

All of my attacks were deflected by the automatic counterattacks. This came as no surprise. Considering his level was estimated to be around 135, the difference in our power was massive. But for now, I only had to trust in the platinum glow surrounding the blade of my weapon. There was no time to think about it anyway.

Rrrrrr...!

Zarish's face twitched. It seemed that when the weapon was charged to this level, the force field generated was enough to distort the air around it.

Before, I wouldn't have been able to control something like this. I had no idea where I would have teleported while wielding the humming sword. But it was a different story with Overload. When I decided on a destination to teleport to, it seemed to calculate the influence of the force field and take me there with pinpoint accuracy.

Judging by Zarish's expression, he must have been under the impression that he would take big damage if he received a direct hit. I hoped he wasn't just faking it again, but... he was a big coward, after all. I decided he really must have been afraid.

Oh, good.

I saw that he started glancing around his surroundings. He must have noticed that there were no more obstacles or escape routes. It was a good thing he'd chased me all the way out here, though it must have been the first time in a while that the thought of fleeing crossed his mind.

"Huh?!"

And so, he easily fell for an illusion of me getting my foot caught in the sand. He swung with all his might to slice up my illusion... Wait, hadn't he declared that he was going to cut both my legs first? My sword was drawn to the opening at his armpit but was promptly deflected with a metallic clash. For some reason, no counterattack came. Aha, he must have switched from automatic counterattacks to automatic blocking. If he was falling back to safety, it meant it was time for me to attack with full force.

Rrrrrrrrr!

There was so much pressure built up that the sword felt like a bomb in my hand. But I couldn't let myself panic. My heart had to remain calm and focused. All I had to do was concentrate on ramping up the barrage and breaking down the iron wall of defense before me.

I gripped my sword as it rang hysterically, not relenting on my continuous offense while I circled my opponent. With no time to even take a deep breath, there was a sense of purity in this moment. I didn't even think about the copious amounts of sweat pouring out. I had never seen Astroblade charged with this much energy before. Zarish's automatic defense held off my aggressive barrage, but I was still leaving numerous wounds on him. His panic was visibly increasing, likely out of fear of my glowing weapon.

The moment I was sure I could break through his defense, he began to scream.

"You bastaaard!!!" A powerful flash of pale blue light filled my view. He had finally activated Sealed Domain, his ultimate defensive barrier. A confident grin spread across Zarish's face as I quickly braked in front of him.

"Hahaaa! Blow yourself up and die!" I had no time to even consider what he meant before his finely ornamented sword fell to the sand within his protective domain. He had dropped his own sword. And with my Acceleration-enhanced vision, I saw his right hand slowly point toward me

with its pinky raised... The gesture for his Divine Finger. A cold shiver ran down my spine.

Divine Finger allowed him to bend the laws of physics and disable the target's freedom of movement. Several scenarios for the consequences of getting hit by this move flashed through my mind. He could absorb the meteor projectile into the barrier and render it useless... No, considering what he had just said, he would likely immobilize me so he could take my weapon and use it against me.

It wasn't that I was afraid of death itself. This world was a dream to me, so the concept of death didn't apply to me here. But I was by no means invincible. Just like how my tattered clothes wouldn't mend the holes in them, my items were a different story. If I lost my sword, I would lose my means of defeating him even if I returned to this world again.

Zarish probably hadn't come to this conclusion himself. It was just a coincidence. He just so happened to come across the method that would have been terrible for me, and I began sweating profusely at the thought. As blood and sweat flowed from me freely, the words of my mentor came to mind.

"Keep your wits about you, and burn what lies ahead into your memory."

Come to think of it, she had shattered the ultimate defensive barrier with ease. She had even told me, "That which is created by man can be destroyed by man." I watched as he slowly raised his hand toward me and remembered the events of last night without fear. Over and over, the sight of the vanishing barrier replayed in my mind.

My first thought was, *"Maybe I was wrong?"* It was supposedly a perfect barrier that was neither physical nor magical in nature. This was why I'd assumed it was the most troublesome skill of all. I had feared it as an invincible, unbeatable defense. But what if I had been wrong? What if it was *because* it could block anything that it was broken so easily by the draconian's hands?

"So, it must work by offsetting energy..." I muttered to myself and decided against giving up. I left a Phantom Image for his Divine Finger. I watched it get distorted out of the corner of my vision and racked my brain to figure out what I could do in my critical state. Then, I stood behind his unprotected back and spoke to him in my usual, calm tone.

"Oh, good. Everything finally fell into place. Considering how cowardly you are, I trusted that you would put up your barrier when cornered."

"...Huh?"

This was a bluff, of course. I wanted him to think this was all part of my plan. I had to admit I was exhausted, so my smile ended up looking pretty weak, but maybe it was intimidating in its own way. Actually, my face looked sleepy by default, so that was probably hoping for too much.

Now, it was time for one last push.

My teleportation technically wasn't an instantaneous warp from one point to another. I could run into any obstacles that were in the way, so it

was actually more like high-speed movement. If he could block any attack that was slower than the speed of sound, perhaps this would work.

I teleported everything from my wrist to the tip of my sword in an angle from a lower right position to an upper left position. It left a straight slice in the barrier along its path, and I repeated the process in the opposite direction to create a large “x”. Then I pressed the Astroblade against the center of the cuts, the weapon glowing with a platinum light.

An inescapable enclosure. You’re the one who trapped yourself, Zarish. If he hadn’t, I wouldn’t have even been able to graze him. Because it was so powerful, it also would have left me wide open when firing. If the barrier offset energy rather than deflecting or nullifying it, I just had to deal an immense amount of damage beyond its capacity into one concentrated point. And I happened to have just the thing right in my hands.

The air I exhaled was so hot that it felt like I was blowing fire. My shoulders felt like they would fall out of their sockets from teleporting so recklessly. I had already passed the limits of my body, but I had to deliver the final words according to battle etiquette.

“Umm, feel my rage, or something like that.”

“Sto—”

Boooooom! The ground of the desert trembled as if a meteorite had crashed into it.

§

The gentle breeze howled softly as it blew by.

Ah, the wind from the east felt nice. Remnants of the rainy season could be felt in the humid breeze. It whisked the heat away, finally allowing my exhausted body to move again.

I leapt down into the crater left in the dunes and landed on the thick cushion of the sand below. At the burnt epicenter of the explosion laid a blond man half-buried in the sand... the hero candidate, Zarish.

The ultimate defensive barrier. It was during our little horror show at his manor when I first witnessed it. I was able to take a long look and analyze it along with Wridra beforehand, which was fortunate for me and the cause of his demise. This ability detected the existence of any who entered the set domain, then emitted a force field to offset any physical or magical disturbance. And to “offset” meant that the barrier was also damaged whenever it rejected any attack. But due to his extremely high level, it was likely that most things would not have been able to deal enough damage to breach its defensive capabilities.

It was a different story for someone like Wridra, but this was a huge hurdle for me.

I had created a cross-shaped cut into the barrier. There was a need for me to surpass the speed of sound to avoid his automatic counterattack, and by drawing out my energy to the brink of death, Astroblade was able to create an explosion of power that could punch through the defensive capabilities. Marie was the one who had taught me that the enclosed space

within the barrier would've caused the force to be trapped inside, greatly amplifying the damage dealt. This was probably the only way to defeat a foe with such a massive life force and stalwart defense.

"Boy, I'm surprised by how tough you are."

Half of Zarish's body was left blackened, and he looked up at me with his one remaining good eye. His pleading expression was full of fear, but was *he* really begging *me* for mercy?

"Don't worry, I made a promise with Eve. I won't kill you. But I'll be taking something dear to you instead."

"Nn...? Ungh...? Ah!" I stepped onto his right hand, and he screamed as I touched the golden ring on his finger. I watched as he clenched his fist tightly, then I cocked my head at him.

"Oh? Do you want me to cut off your finger along with it? Now, open your hand."

"Hngh... Hngh... Hnnngh!" His trembling fingers uncurled as ordered. I already knew what to do with the four rings—no, eight, including the other hand.

I removed them one by one. They were created by his evil skill that had bent so many women to his will with their terrifying power. This was my main objective in the first place. I could have removed them while he was unconscious... but if I'd done that, he would have frantically chased me down to no end.

That was why I had to defeat him utterly and completely in order to break his spirit and achieve peace for us. He managed to croak out his plea with a tormented voice.

"Stop... Without those, I..."

"Don't worry. I'll be handing these to your subordinates. What they do with these is up to them. Maybe they'll return them to you if you've been treating them well."

"Hngh...?!" I figured they would destroy or throw them away, though. Come to think of it, I thought Wridra mentioned that she wanted one. Oh well. I had done what I could.

Taking all of the rings in hand, I stood up. There were no more clouds in the sky, and the rainy season in this world was coming to its end. I saw the bright, blue desert sky for the first time in a while, and I couldn't help but be entranced, despite being covered with cuts and bruises.

My foot sank into the sand as I took a step forward, and I thought about how sand would have scattered all over the place if it hadn't been weighed down with water like it was now.

§

I went back to the riverbed from earlier to retrieve my bag and froze in place. The three others were waiting beside my belongings.

I was surprised, but I sort of expected it at the same time. I gave Wridra a look as if to say, "*You tricked me*," but she shrugged as if to say, "*Look who is talking*." She was right; I had tricked them first.

We made a promise that I would have a discussion with them before making any moves. But there was no way I could've discussed this with them beforehand. I had merely made the decision to take out the unconscious Zarish in the most efficient way possible. I had, in a sense, tricked and betrayed them the moment I decided to go through with it.

It was hard to stand there with the guilt swelling inside me. There stood Marie with her long hair shimmering in the sunlight, her clear, pale skin, and her amethyst eyes—which looked tired from lack of sleep. She must have been watching my battle from afar.

The sky was beautifully clear after the rain, and a humid wind blew by. The air was nice and refreshing in contrast to how I felt inside. Sand crunched under Marie's foot as the elf girl stepped toward me. My heart ached to see her eyes were swollen from crying so much.

"Welcome back," she said.

"Thanks." We made the exchange from about a meter or so away. But the distance felt enormous compared to when we were holding each other's hands.

"I..."

Zarish was a person who had no qualms about beating on the weak. Unless I broke his spirit by myself and took away his rings, he would have continued to do so. No, that was just an excuse. The truth was, I simply loathed him. That man who had touched Mariabelle as if he knew her and plotted to make her his object.

But as I struggled to find the words, Marie turned her face to show me her cheek. Her skin was red where she pointed, but I wondered what it was supposed to mean. As I tried to figure it out, she parted her lips to speak once again.

"There's no need to apologize. I was watching footage of the events at the riverbed as they occurred, but I was shouting for you to cut off Zarish's fingers as he lay unconscious. Eve and I got in a scuffle then."

"...Huh?"

I quickly looked over at Eve. It was hard to tell at first due to her darker skin, but one of her eyelids was swollen. It seemed her displeased expression was because their fight had ended in a draw, with each of them sustaining those injuries. Wait, had it really ended in a draw, even with Marie's small stature? I stood there flabbergasted, and Marie's pale purple eyes looked directly at me with a bit of a somber expression.

"I mean, there wasn't going to be a better opportunity than that. He treated those women at the manor so terribly, and he even tried to kill Eve. If you didn't take drastic measures there, he would have continued his atrocities."

"That's true, but... Oh, I see. So that's why Wridra stopped me." I looked over at her, but the black-haired beauty shrugged her shoulders and played dumb. She had done so to stop her friend Eve from fighting with Marie and to lead me to a better path.

"So there's no need to apologize," Marie said as she smiled at me. Then, I was surprised by how quickly the guilt in my heart dissipated. I had done such a shameful thing, but these two had made the uneasy feeling in me vanish completely.

The wind blowing from the east really did feel refreshing, and I stared at the girl with hair as white as the clouds. Her purple eyes met mine, her long, white lashes meeting as she blinked.

She was so precious to me. And there was one thing I realized through all of this. Even when facing the hero candidate himself, I couldn't just stand still. I had recklessly plowed forward, and what seemed to be an obstacle that was impossible to overcome was now gone.

It seemed Mariabelle was far more important to me than I'd thought.

Maybe I loved her. No, I'd loved her for a long time now. Ever since the day we had held hands in Japan and started walking together. Before I knew it, I was speaking my honest feelings out loud to her.

"Mariabelle, I've always had feelings for you. I'd like you to go out with me, if that's okay with you."

"Hm? What do you mean? We're always together already." Her straightforward response left me frozen for a while.

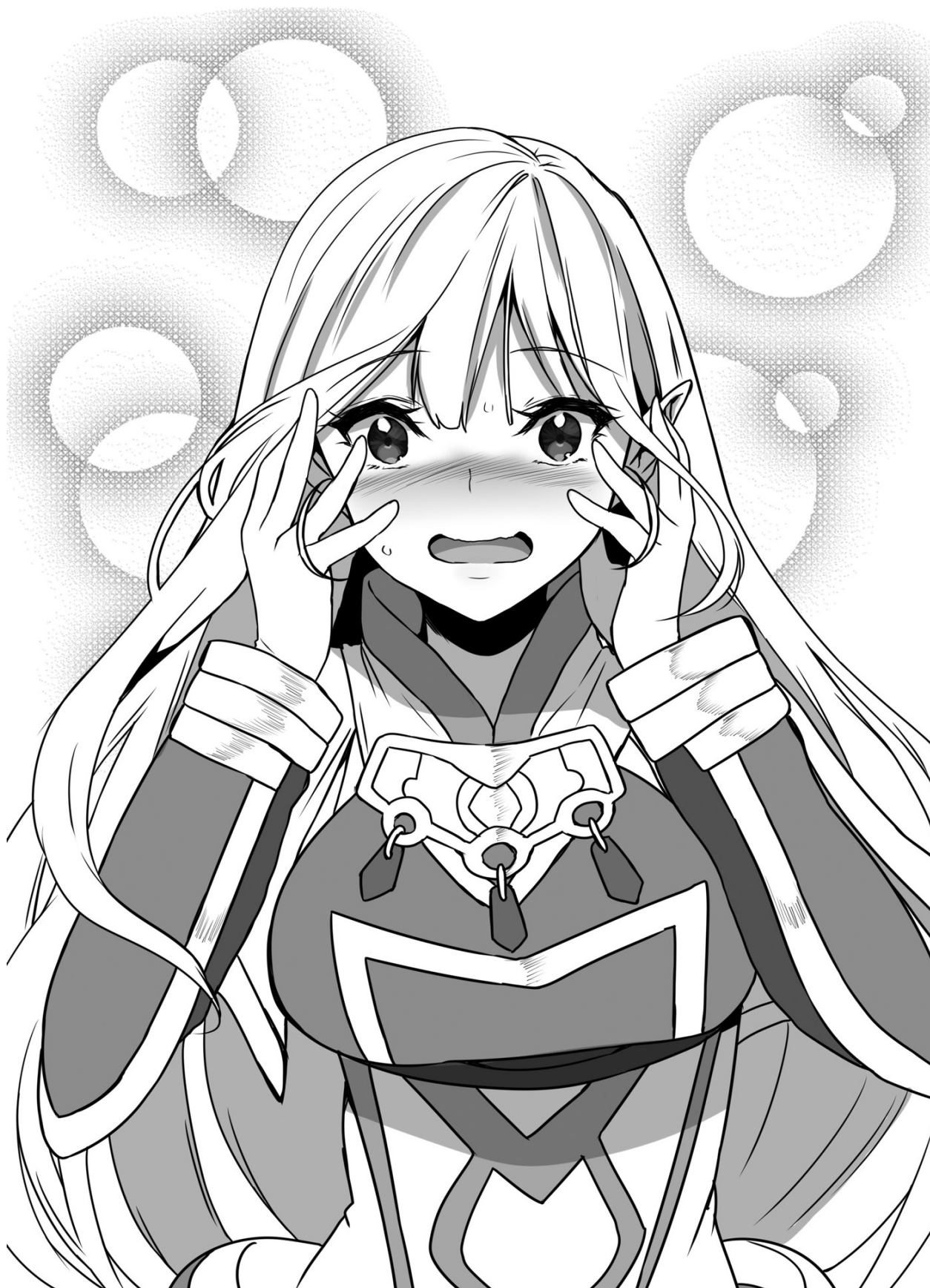
Whaaa...? Was the phrase "go out with me" was a bit too difficult to understand? Maybe I should have asked her to officially date me instead? It took quite a lot of courage to get the words out, so explaining what I meant was going to be incredibly difficult. My face was hot enough as it was. Marie cocked her head, completely oblivious, with the other two ladies looking up at the sky out of second-hand embarrassment.

"It's hard to understand when you don't specify where you want to 'go out.' Come to think of it, you mentioned going to the beach. Of course I'd like to go with you. I'm interested in those so-called swimsuits, too... What? That's not it? So what *did* you mean?"

The other ladies made a face as if to say "*Oof...*" Then, they alternated between looking at me and each other. This was basically torture. Unable to handle it anymore, Wridra discreetly whispered into Marie's ear. Though, she whispered loud enough that I could hear her saying "He is asking to court you."

Yup, this absolutely was torture.

"Court...? Huh?!" There was a blank look of surprise on her face, and then her eyes widened into saucers, and she looked straight at me. She looked adorable as her pale skin turned bright red... Oh boy, this was embarrassing. I never would've guessed I would confess my love for a woman for the first time at twenty-five years old, never mind to an elf girl.



I had a hard time meeting her stare, but then I felt something touch me. It felt smooth and soft to the touch, and I looked toward the source of the sweet, feminine scent to find Marie staring right at me. She was close enough that I could've embraced her if I reached out. She let me move up closer to her. I felt the tip of her nose touch the side of my neck, and she whispered to me.

"D-D-Did you, try to court me just now?"

"Uhh, I-I did... Um, I've felt this way for a long time, but I like you a lot." I felt myself grow so hot that smoke could've come out of my head, and Marie's eyes and mouth opened wide. She pressed her little forehead against my shoulder, and it was so warm I could almost hear it sizzle against my skin. Marie stayed in that position as she muttered.

"I, I, like you, too. When we first saw those cherry blossoms together and you supported me while I was dozing off on that bench, I thought... maybe it would be nice if we could be together."

Ohhh no, our faces weren't just on fire now. We were getting so hot that we were both sweating profusely. We probably should have hugged for the sake of romance, but that would have ended up being a pretty sweaty embrace. We both knew this, so we just stood there with our eyes spinning as we hesitated.

Our fingertips touched. It just happened by chance, but then both of us consciously reached out to intertwine our fingers with the other's. Her fingertip felt warm and soft as I rubbed it with my own. We touched fingers some more, and then Marie's shoulders twitched, and she let out a heated breath onto my neck.

"For cryin' out loud..."

"Hyes!"

"Yes, what is it, Ms. Eve?!"

We immediately backed away from each other, then looked toward Eve, who had just spoken for the first time since coming here. The dark elf woman pointed in the direction of the royal capital.

"We get it already, so why don't you go back to the room we stayed in last night and have sex the— Yeooow?!"

She screamed in pain as she ate a headbutt from Wridra. I never thought I'd see someone get headbutted by a dragon. Eve's scandalous comment had taken me by surprise, and I slowly turned around... to find Mariabelle standing there with her face red to the tips of her ears, her mouth flapping wordlessly.

Uh oh. This was bad. I was probably beet red myself, and when she held onto my finger with her small hand, I nearly passed out from the level of cuteness. We each stared into the distance and eased our tension over time. After taking several deep breaths, the redness in my face began to subside. I finally took Marie by the hands, and our memorable moment had come.

"So, would you like to go out with me, starting today?"

"Yes, I would. I'm your lover from now on." We smiled at each other. And so, my relationship with Mariabelle had officially begun.

§

As the sun began to set and the day turned to evening, a straight groove was being dug through the sand dunes. Zarish the hero candidate crawled forth on the brink of death.

Everything he had built up had been lost. Only the burning desire for vengeance moved him forward as he gripped the sand with fury in his face. Now that his rings were gone, his collection would never return to him. He had spent half of the day thinking about how this was all because of that strange black-haired boy.

But this wasn't over. With how much he had contributed to the neighboring country, he should have been able to regain authority after making certain arrangements. He did lose a massive number of levels, but he simply had to achieve victory through power unrelated to levels. Yes, there were plenty of methods to get the job done, like hiring an assassin.

"Kill... Kill him... I'll kill him!!!" He was so lost in his rage that he didn't even notice someone had approached him. Zarish saw someone step up in the corner of his vision and trembled. His gaze fearfully inched upward to find tanned thighs, and then they met a dark elf's blue eyes.

"Ahh, Eve... You came for me!"

"Yeah, of course. You know, I did end up getting killed, but I got to have so much fun in Japan because of it. So I don't really hate you now. I'm letting you off just this once, okay?"

She smiled, and Zarish felt a wave of relief wash over him. He couldn't understand what she was talking about, but he was elated to see she had come to help him despite all of the abuse he had given her. Having been with her longer than the rest of his collection, a bond must have been formed between them before he even realized it.

"Here, have some water. Drink slowly."

"Right... Thanks..." He took big gulps from the canteen she handed him, just now realizing how close to death he was. Vitality began to return to his body, and he began to shake. He truly was in a critical state.

"I've been with you for so long. I guess I like you after all, Zarie."

"'Zarie'...? No, that's fine, call me what you'd like." He felt a small urge to kill growing inside him. Seeing her acting up just because his rings were removed, an overwhelming impulse to trample her underfoot threatened to take over. But he had to endure it for now.

The dark elf crouched down and pulled out what seemed to be a piece of precious metal from her waist. It was a ring gleaming in the sunlight, the manifestation of Zarish's skill. Known as Engagement, it brought the subject who wore its matching ring under the wearer's control.

"Eve... are you... giving this back to me?"

"I thought about it for a long time. But I like your face after all. And the old you, when you were so nice to me."

Huh, I don't recall ever being nice to you. Perhaps he had done so out of necessity when he was starting out and it had been just the two of them. He knew full well that his face was attractive, so it was highly likely that he'd given her such treatment as a strategic choice.

"But I want you to promise one thing," Eve said. "Will you promise not to do any more horrible things to me?"

"Of course. I'll be kinder to you than anyone, and I swear I'll love no one but you," Zarish replied. Eve smiled. The foolish girl was easily swayed by his lie and slid the ring onto Zarish's finger. It stalled a bit at the first joint of his ring finger, then was moved up toward its base.

"You know, I've been with you for all this time, so I know certain things about you. Like how your eyes look when you're lying."

"Ngh...! I'm not lying..."

Just be fooled for a little while longer! All I need you to do is to slide the ring on all the way and put your life on the line to take me somewhere safe. Then, he would have been able to sell this useless dark elf to a brothel. After all, this was the only one remaining of his precious rings. As Zarish considered this, his wide eyes shifted over. He stared at the ring that Eve was trying to place on his finger and screamed.

"This... is the wrong one! This is the ring *you're* supposed to wear!"

"Whaaat? This is the right one. Oh, did you already forget what happened back then? You know, the day you first tricked me."

Back then? What was she talking about? Come to think of it, he couldn't remember much of the days he'd spent back when they were a duo. But his memories had been getting more and more clear since he had removed the ring...

"I mean, this ring was mine in the first place. I guess my luck ran out when I believed you when you said you'd still love me even after taking the ring off."

A chill ran down his spine at the look in her eyes. Cold sweat erupted from every pore in his body, and he couldn't understand why those eyes struck such instinctive fear into him. Just who was this dark elf? And why had they ended up pairing up in the first place?

"I'll tell you one more important thing, Zarie. You're my slave, and I'm the master."

"I'm... your slave?" He tried to laugh it off, but his body began to tremble. It was almost as if his body instinctively knew that her words were true.

"But I learned a lot after going to this place called Japan. There's this cool boy who's really kind and easygoing, but he never gives up on what's important. Say, Zarie, it sure would make me happy if you turned out like that, too."

"N-No... No! Stop, don't touch me!"

"Nn, you're so cute when you struggle like that. Let's go apologize to everyone and work hard together, okay?" She pressed the ring on all the

way. Zarish felt his skill disappear from inside him at the same time. And so, his Engagement skill was reborn into Commitment. No, it only returned to its original owner, to be precise.

That's right... I stole this skill from Eve and intended to keep her alive until I could make it my own. If I killed her, the skill would have vanished. That was why I wanted to gain complete control of it, and once I was able to control multiple people at once, I was finally going to kill...

...

...

...

"Lady Eve, I am terribly sorry, but my wounds are too severe for me to move my legs. May I ask for your assistance?" Zarish asked.

"You don't need to talk so formally. Turns out I like being on more friendly terms. Here, hold on to me. Let's go say sorry to everyone first." Zarish looked at her apologetically, and Eve's cheeks turned a shade of red.

Yes... She is my master, and the woman who I will serve for life. Zarish was deeply regretful about forgetting his own past until now, and he felt gratitude as Eve helped him up with the kindness of a goddess.

§

When we returned to the manor of black roses, we were met with quite a bit of chaos.

First of all, the mistress of the manor, Puseri, was like a raging demon now that she had been released from the ring's control. I couldn't blame her, considering all the years that Zarish had used her manor like he owned the place, tarnished her family name, and physically taken advantage of her...

Next, Eve, who they assumed to be dead, suddenly appeared without a scratch on her. The women rose to their feet, demanding Zarish's head, but the venom in their eyes was immediately replaced with surprise as they saw Eve. They all piled on to hug her until she screamed for mercy. Taking Zarish out of the equation, these women were all dear friends who had spent many years together.

And finally... Zarish, who had been waiting outside, made his appearance.

Puseri's hair bristled up like black roses coming to life, and Zarish looked more horrified than he had ever been. I almost expected his blond hair to turn completely white with fear. Come to think of it, we used her to scare him so many times that she may have turned into a symbol of fear in his mind.

Zarish prostrated himself, but he was met with explosive wrath. Not only did Puseri hurl all manners of verbal abuse at him, but she punched, kicked, and punched him some more in a tempest of violence. Seeing this, the malice in the other members seemed to dissipate... In fact, they were backing away from her a bit.

"Wow, that's impressive. Puseri is like a demon. Maybe Eve was right, and this all could have been resolved just by taking his rings off."

To be honest, I didn't really want to get involved in all of this, so I decided to take a stroll through the garden of beautiful roses in bloom. Her response was only natural. That man had wiped out her entire family. He could have spent an eternity trying to make amends, and it still wouldn't have been enough. This was why I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd killed him then and there.

"Boy, would you look at that. You can't find black roses like this anywhere in Japan."

"They're glistening like black pearls. Have you heard? It's been four whole years since they bloomed like this. Maybe it's because we taught that man a lesson," Marie replied. I was impressed to hear that. I heard loud crashing noises from the manor even now, but I kept my distance from their business. It was scary, and I really didn't want to poke my nose into all that.

"But I was surprised to find out Eve was the original owner of the rings." Little did she know, Eve had secretly told me about this at the park on the way home from Grimland. She had told me it would've been fine if I injured him, but I had to leave his fingers intact and return his rings to her.

"Yeah, maybe the main issue with materialization skills is that they can be stolen, like in this case." This meant there was a chance that Zarish could have become her master again, but it was unlikely that Eve would let her guard down after what she had gone through. In a sense, she may have been the ultimate keeper, and she was like the master of a rabid dog.

But this whole commotion wasn't very fitting of the elite Team Diamond. I caught a glimpse of Zarish earlier, half naked in his tattered clothes, but maybe they would go easy on him, considering he had just lost an eye... Well, probably not.

Maybe I'd give it some time and show them the footage of the horror show we put on later. It was pretty hilarious, so it may have helped calm their anger somewhat. Though, this would probably have to be several weeks later.

I walked through the garden of flowers, maintained with love and care.

At the end of the footpath was a shaded area where one could enjoy the sun filtered through the foliage, as if it was a resting area for anyone who was strolling about. We had gotten permission to stay at the manor of black roses, in addition to Zera's mansion, and we let Shirley guide us to our seats as she glided over with her semi-transparent feet. She was wearing a servant's outfit that Team Diamond had been wearing, but maybe someone had let her borrow it. Wridra joined us after going around on a stroll of her own, and three fragrant cups of tea were set on the table before us, along with some baked snacks and red fruits.

"Ah, they really do use some nice tea leaves. Mmm, I can enjoy it just from the smell," I said.

"Hmm, it has such a strong, unique scent. It's so light and easy to drink, despite its strong fragrance... Oh, how I envy rich people. Let's become rich ourselves one day, okay?" Marie said before taking a sip of tea. This tea was meant to be enjoyed by taking in the smell and drinking small sips over time. I glanced up to find Shirley looking at everyone with her sky blue eyes and smiling gently.

There were many dresses in this manor, but Marie ended up picking a pure white one piece in the end. It wasn't too different from what she wore in Japan, but it was fitting for the adorable elf girl.

As for Wridra, she was sniffing the fruit that had been prepared for us. Then, she glanced right at me... Man, she caught on quick.

"Oh, the fruits in this region aren't very good," Marie warned, but Wridra tossed it into her mouth without letting it deter her. She groaned, "*Hnnngh!*" and chewed for a bit, but then her eyes sparkled in delight.

"This is delicious! Its sweet, yet tart juices are overflowing with every bite!"

"What? That can't be..." Marie said doubtfully as her eyes met mine. It seemed she caught me smiling at her, and she reached for the ruby-red fruit in a fluster. She placed the plump fruit up to her mouth and punctured its skin with her teeth, and then her eyes widened as its juices seeped out, filling her senses with a sour-sweet flavor and refreshing scent.

Marie let out a sigh with a dreamy expression, her cheeks slightly pink. She began to chew and swallowed with the same blissful expression on her face the entire time.

"It's so sweet! Mmm, I love this sweet tartness. Where did you get this?"

"Hehe, these are cherries that were sent from Aomori. Grandpa must have really wanted us to enjoy some delicious ones. It's pretty rare for them to be so big."

The two women "*Oooh*"ed cheerily. It seemed Japanese products were highly trusted, even by residents of the fantasy world, and they enjoyed the flavors of early summer to their heart's content. Though, cherries were actually quite pricey. It may have become a bit troubling if they started asking for more. I did have some left in the fridge in my room, so I decided to take some pictures of us eating them to send to my grandpa later. Suddenly, I felt Marie poke my shoulder.

"Look, the cherries your grandfather gave us are about to run out."

I was looking up at the sky, then turned to look from Marie's prompting. She held up a cherry and told me to open my mouth, so I obeyed.

I waited with my mouth open, but then something covered my vision. I felt her soft hand over my eyes, and a cherry touched my lips after a delay. The sun-blessed fruit left a sour-sweet scent, and I felt a soft sensation cover my lips. I heard the chair creaking, and I could feel myself growing hot from the soft "something" and sweet fragrance.

Did she just...?

My vision suddenly returned, and there I saw an elf wiping fruit juice from her lips. Then, she flashed a smile as brilliant as the sun itself.

“Hehe, did it taste good?”

Uh, I, well... To be honest, I wasn't really paying attention to that. But I nodded without really thinking about it, as if guided by an invisible force. The elf who lived in my room was so attractive that it was troubling. I chewed on another one of the remaining fruits, and it was indeed sour-sweet and delicious.

Beads of water could be seen on the surface of the plump fruits, and they glimmered in the sunlight leaking through the foliage. It was almost as if they signified the end of the rainy season and official start of summer.

Chapter of Slavery END

Meeting Mariabelle the Half-Fairy Elf

The room was lit with indirect lighting, and two steamy mugs sat on the bedside shelf. Someone's slender fingers wrapped around the handle of one of the mugs: an adorable elf girl with big eyes. She brought the mug closer to her mouth, blew a few times, then took a sip. It was clear that the drink was hot from the look on her face. She then looked up at me as if to urge me to take a sip, too.

I took the mug in my hand, considering how the color of her eyes made her look like she came right out of a picture book. They were a fantastical amethyst color, and her pajama-clad skin was so pale I could almost see through it. Her lips were as vivid as a flower in contrast, and one smile from them was enough to make my heart burst.

"Um, Marie, it's almost time for bed, but shouldn't you lie down soon? I could read a picture book if you're not sleepy yet..." I suggested, but she just beckoned me over. I tilted my head in confusion and moved closer, and she grabbed me by the hand. She pulled me in and sat me down next to her, moving her beautiful face closer to mine.

"Not tonight. I just want to enjoy the moment for now. I'm thinking back to when you confessed your feelings for me." It wasn't fair for her to whisper from so close when she was so distractingly cute. My face turned red hot, and Marie had a satisfied grin on her face.

"Hehe, how adorable," Marie said. "I bet you get picked on at work all the time because you're so cute. Then you get picked on by me when you get home, too. You are my boyfriend, after all."

I felt a bit conflicted as a working adult getting teased by this girl, with her hair still semi-wet from her bath. But all those feelings flew out the window when she placed her head on my shoulder. I could feel her smooth hair and breath on me, and my heart began to beat louder and louder.

I never even imagined I'd see that straightforward look in her eyes as we gazed at each other. Maybe I wasn't the only one having this thought. She had the sweetest smile on her face as she uttered that rather cruel comment.

"This just feels so, so strange. I really hated you when we first met, you know? You always had that smile on your face, so you probably had no idea."

"Wha... You're joking, right? Oh... You're serious. I'm actually pretty shocked," I replied. She cocked her head with a genuine look of confusion, and I let out a small sigh.

Then, the image of her from back then began to come back to mind. Her brows were permanently furrowed in a displeased expression. The Marie from back then and the current Marie felt like completely different people, and I couldn't help but nod in agreement.

"Yeah, it is strange now that you mention it. I didn't realize how close we'd gotten compared to back then."

"Yes, it all happened before I knew it, so it completely snuck up on me. You were just a boy I hated, and now I don't even mind rubbing noses with you."

With that, she poked my nose with her own. She then flashed a childlike smile, but I wasn't quite as unaffected as her. Her pretty face was way too close. It wasn't like I was being bashful, but I cleared my throat before speaking.

"Things were pretty intense at first. You killed me right after we met for the first time."

"H-Hey, do you not remember what you did?! That definitely wasn't an overreaction on my part! Besides, it was just a dream to you, so you didn't die! It doesn't count!" Marie repeatedly shook her head in denial.

But there was a black cat quietly curled up nearby, and its ears perked up in response. The flustered look on Marie's face was basically an admission that she had killed me, and this seemed to pique Wridra's interest.

Why had the mild-mannered Mariabelle killed me so many times?

The moment may have been akin to the moment mystery novels were unraveled. The question of "Why?" took over all else, making one forget to even eat as they continued to turn the pages. They said curiosity killed the cat, but the black cat in question was an Arkdragon. And even the old me had been killed by Mariabelle because of my curiosity. The black cat moved closer, itching to unravel the story of our past. Then, the cat sat on the bed, as if preparing for a movie to start.

I took a sip of coffee before opening my mouth to speak. It had all happened a long time ago... over ten years ago, in fact. If I recalled correctly, I had just become a middle schooler in Japan.

§

My throat was completely parched as I leaned against a tree and sighed.

It wasn't a particularly thick tree, but my approximately ten-year-old frame was small enough to hide behind it completely. Just behind it, something that was as big as a bear could be seen moving around. Its thick, extended head was covered in fangs like a worm, and its stout, powerful limbs were covered in coarse, reddish fur. Its claws were as long as steel piles, and they were likely used to split open the heads of its prey once they were captured.

The creature seemed very animalistic as it sniffed around in the dim evening light, and I was stricken with fear, knowing that I was its target. Maybe it sensed the still-bloody dagger I was holding.

How scary. I definitely can't win here. Although I knew it was just a dream, I couldn't help but feel fear. Even video games could be scary, after all.

I fearfully held in my breath, and my eyes met with a bird that happened to stop on my shoulder. I was the one being tracked down, and this little bird obviously had nothing to do with it. The bird was probably after the breadcrumbs in my chest pocket, and it seemed to be debating whether it should flee or not. I mean, I couldn't say what the right decision would have been for sure, but fleeing was probably a good idea. This powerful foe with an estimated level of 38 had just recently appeared in this forest.

I had found a notice during my travels calling for someone to slay a monster, but I would have just gotten laughed at if I tried to take up the challenge, due to my young appearance. Since that option was out the window, I had stepped into the forest to check it out for myself. Perhaps it was because the elf forest was so close, but there were very few monsters around. My mistake was that I'd forgotten my original objective for coming here and got carried away leveling up. The monsters of the forest moved rather slowly and used attacks that inflicted sleep, but this status effect wasn't very effective on me. I was able to acquire a lot of experience points as a result, and I was pretty happy about gaining some levels.

...I didn't expect the monster to smell the blood and make a little appearance.

I had hid in a fluster as soon as I detected something approaching, but my situation was far from ideal. Not much was known about this creature, but it went by the nickname of Avenger and was infamous due its stubborn tenacity in tracking down its prey. I wasn't going to be able to hide for long.

As for me, I was a novice level 16 with only Reprisal in my repertoire. This skill was acquired by repeating specific motions, such as during sword training, and was known as a skill for beginners. That was why most advanced swordsmen got rid of it rather quickly.

Anyway, the little bird seemed to finish eating and flew off toward the dim forest. I followed it with my eyes and noticed something shining between the trees ahead. A river. If I took a swim there, it should have washed away the smell of blood. The issue was whether or not I could get there without being spotted.

Hmm, I definitely wanted to increase my agility. All the strength in the world couldn't help you get away from an opponent you couldn't beat. I considered these thoughts as I removed my bag from my shoulders and quietly dropped it on the ground.

Just then, I heard rough breathing next to my ear, and I crouched down without even turning in its direction. Luckily, the worm-like head impaled itself into the tree, and the impact was great enough to uproot the entire thing.

I was good at running away; in fact, all I did was flee. I did a quick front flip to narrowly avoid sharp claws that sank into the ground. Then, I tossed a dagger at the creature without even taking careful aim and took off.

It seemed to have found its mark out of pure luck, because I heard the beast yelp behind me. The unfortunate part was, this enraged Avenger and

seemed to kick its feral instincts into gear. The creature bounded forward in a full sprint, its movements light and nimble.

I slipped through the opening between the trees ahead, but I couldn't compete in terms of level, agility, or the distance traveled with each step. Even as I lowered my posture and fled at the speed of a bunny, the steel piles digging into the ground made me break out in a cold sweat. Why in the world did I want to meet such a terrifying thing? The river finally came into view after the series of unfortunate events, but the sight brought me no relief.

"Ugh, it's flooding... Maybe because of the storm from last night." If I dove in now, I wouldn't have just washed off the smell; I'd probably have ended up dead.

My choices were to get eaten by the monster and wake up in Japan or drown myself and wake up. Personally, I would have recommended the latter by far. This was because if I chose the former, my clothes would have ended up in shreds.

It was quite a harsh world for a young man. Although I was used to getting robbed and killed by monsters and men, starting over from zero was pretty taxing both mentally and physically. And so, I dove into the river without hesitation.

The water propelled me forward with great force, but I quickly made some distance between the monster and me at the same time. In that sense, the storm had ended up helping me. Although I did nearly end up drowning... but it was almost time to wake up anyway, so I guess I didn't really mind in the end.

"Goodbye, land of dreams!" I wanted to shout, but what actually came out was, "*Gabagh, glarbh!*"

A bird pecked at me, and I woke up to the crisp morning air. Well, I actually woke up in Aomori, went to school, had a nice, delicious dinner with my grandpa and grandma, then went to bed.

I was starting over again. But where was I? I was stuck hanging from a tree branch, but I remembered getting washed away in a river last night. I grew more and more alert, noticing the water droplets on my cheek and the sound of running water from a distance. I raised my head to find a waterfall directly in front of me. Whoa, and there was that bird, making a chirping noise and staring right at me. Its beady eyes were pretty cute, but I was on the verge of life or death here.

Hm, maybe I'd fallen here from above? The flow of the river had become completely calm, and I could see the clear water splashing onto the tiered rocks. The place was surrounded by trees with a wonderful view of a rainbow in the distance.

Just then, I noticed someone was talking, but it was in a language I didn't understand, so all I knew was that it was a young woman speaking. The moment I looked below me, I felt my body temperature suddenly increase.

I had no idea a girl was bathing there. She sat on a protruding rock, using the splashing water as a shower and scrubbing her body while humming cheerily. Her hair was a pure white I had never seen before, and her skin was just as pale. Her hair clung to the curves of her body, and her butt turned toward me was... No, no, I couldn't watch.

I closed my eyes in a hurry, but as was apparent from the conversation I'd heard earlier, she had company in the water. I had no idea what they were talking about, though. I managed to learn the common language after several years, so I thought I had a grasp of the spoken words around here. Unable to contain my curiosity, I slowly opened my eyes. Then, I noticed their pointy ears.

Elves! They were a race that hardly ever left their forest and tended to avoid humans. And yet, they were as beautiful as gemstones, and it was said that one could never forget about them after laying eyes upon them.

There were several things that I hadn't realized at this time: the branch I was hanging on was about to snap, the elf girl was about to stretch and look up in my direction, and that girl was known to hate humans more than anyone else in the tribe.

Crack! Crk! Kssh!

The rumors about them being unforgettable were true. In that moment, I realized just how beautifully her amethyst eyes gleamed in the sunlight. I fell toward the ground, embracing her stunning body without thinking about it, and my mind was honestly in a daze until the moment we were dragged into the waterfall basin together.

"Kya!"

Then came the splashing sound of water. I was enveloped in a curtain of bubbles, unable to tell which way was up. I desperately flailed around for something to grab on to, then found both my arms and face covered by something soft.

(What is this?)

The answer to my question came when the curtain of bubbles disappeared. But it appeared there were some things in this world that I was better off not knowing. The moment I saw her feminine mounds and the vivid protrusions at their tips, we both started foaming at the mouth. The girl desperately pushed me away, and there was no way I could put up any resistance.

Oh, and there was one more thing I didn't know. This girl was exceedingly talented among her peers, and she had the ability to summon multiple water spirits known as Undines.

Supposedly, the elf said in Elvish, "Undines, tear this goblin that desecrates our forest into shreds." And so, my clothes were cut up even worse than they would have been if I'd fought that monster, and I died.

§

I heard birds chirping in the distance.

There was a dense forest all around me, and when I looked up, I saw trees stretching high into the sky. In fact, I could barely see the blue sky with the mass of freely-growing branches overhead, which provided a cool shade despite the bright sun.

Also staring up at the sky was Mariabelle, who at the time was a bit shorter than she was now. Her hair was bound in two bunches, like bunny ears, and they swayed to the left and right as she looked around at her surroundings. I could see dwellings in the distance from between the trees, and she noticed someone calling out to her from one of the windows there.

"Marie, be sure to go with someone if you're going out. It hasn't been long since the storm passed, and Ozbell still isn't back from his patrol."

"Y-Yes, Mother!"

She waved as she replied and began walking along the footpath. The blue and white stones tied to her wrists and ankles clinked together with every step. There weren't many children in this village, but they did have their own trends. A few of the girls were into things like clothing, but since there were no stores selling them, they dyed and sewed clothes themselves.

Mariabelle was also into clothing as a hobby and was adorned in a nice outfit for the day. Her top was tied with a string and held up her small breasts, while the skirt around her waist covered more of her skin with ample fabric, going for a more reserved, feminine look. The adults considered it more fashionable to expose more of one's legs and arms, but the children didn't heed their advice in that regard.

Now, the reason Mariabelle disobeyed her mother and went off on her own was actually something she couldn't even tell her close friends.

She continued through the footpath and the sound of softly flowing water came within earshot. She proceeded farther ahead while a large deer watched her, eventually arriving at the waterfall where she would often go for a dip.

Mariabelle crouched down at a slightly elevated spot and stared into the basin of the waterfall. There were layers of rocks all around the cliff and the waterfall, providing good footholds. She made her way down the rocks, her eyebrows furrowed doubtfully as she took each step in her sandals.

"Did I really kill someone...?" She quietly uttered the disturbing words to herself.

The day after the storm passed, she had gone for a swim with her friends for the first time in several days. There, someone fell onto her from above, dragging her into the water before she could even scream, and she had called out an order before the shock of the cold even settled in.

"Undines, tear this goblin that desecrates our forest into shreds."

Remembering her own words and the scene that played out immediately afterward, she covered her own eyes with her hands. Seeing the water dyed with red, her heart was stricken with horror. She did indeed hate humans. The humans she happened to run into a long time ago were filthy and tried

to capture her. She fled in a hurry, but still wondered to this day what those chains they were holding were for.

The way the adults spoke of humans gave her a bad impression of them, as well, and it sounded like they were barbarians that waged war out of greed for wealth. That was why she had called for Undine to attack in earnest. Although she did have a strong dislike for humans, the truth was that she had murdered a child without hearing him out... or so she thought. Mariabelle groaned as she stared at the water surface, her friend's words replaying in her mind.

"Huh? A human? Here? No, I haven't seen one."

"I saw you fall in the river, of course, but... Look, the water is still clean. There aren't any bits of clothing or anything, either." Marie turned pale, but her friend only looked at her with a dubious expression. She frantically searched around herself, but it was indeed odd that there wasn't a shred of cloth left behind. Marie held her head and crouched down, unable to make sense of what she had seen.

"Uuu... There's no way I would mistake something like that! I know I saw a boy around the same age as me with his eyes wide open in the water!" It was right after she had called Undine to attack. She saw his eyes widen with fear, and then his body was torn to shreds...

"...Ngh! N-No, no! It's making me shiver thinking about it!" Unable to stand the chill coursing through her body, she hugged her arms and stepped in place. The all-too-real vision came back to her once again, and goosebumps broke out all over her body. Yet no matter how much she searched, there was no trace of any evidence proving that the events had occurred. She couldn't sleep the previous night, thinking she had cut him down too finely, but it was odd that there wasn't even a piece of bone left.

"B-But if there was, I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight, either..." Her pale purple eyes widened. The elven village was protected by a powerful barrier so the inhabitants could live in peace. However, she noticed that the stone altar had been destroyed, perhaps due to the storm. Just then, she remembered something. It was from the night the storm had arrived several days ago, when she was sleeping in the same room as the children.

"Marie, do you know why the village is protected?" Mariabelle remembered her friend Nike asking in her usual mild-mannered demeanor. Marie put her blanket over her head, thinking it would be a scary story, but Nike whispered right next to her ear.

"I heard there was once a terrible war at the top of that waterfall. The river turned red, and even the fish changed color. How scary, right? And they say that if we don't have the barrier blocking things... they appear."

It wasn't fair how her gentle manner of speaking had changed at the end of her statement. Marie was stricken in fear and made a loud gulp, then covered her ears and crouched down like she did at the night of the storm. Maybe that child she'd seen yesterday was someone who had perished on

the old battlefield. What if he had been roaming around and talked to her without knowing he had died?

"H-Hmph, I'm not afraid of ghosts. It's already bright out, and look, see? I have my bracelets for warding off evil right here. So there's no way ghosts would appear, and they'd be no match for my spirit friends."

The girl spoke out loud, though it was unclear who exactly she was talking to. Just then, she heard a *clack*. She slowly opened her closed eyes to find her bracelet's string had torn, its blue and white stones falling to the ground. Goosebumps rose on her skin once again. Unfortunately, she had let go of the hand holding her ears, as well. Footsteps could be heard approaching from behind.

Mariabelle turned around slowly, face pale and still in her crouched position. Somewhere in the thickets surrounding the river, she saw leaves shake with an audible rustling noise. Her vision began to flash, as if she was about to faint, and her body was frozen in place. She could tell the tips of her ears were trembling.

He couldn't be there. There was no way. She had taken him down yesterday. And besides, *he* should have been the one afraid of *her*. These thoughts raced through her head as she took in shallow breaths, then swallowed hard.

Just then, a hand appeared from a dark thicket and grasped a tree. Mariabelle's mouth was permanently affixed in a perfectly round shape, and her entire body was immobilized. All she could do was stare at the faintly visible hand.

"@*&\$+****!" (*Translation: Hello there!*) A figure wearing tree bark around his waist with a stone axe in hand and mud all over his body suddenly appeared, and Marie trembled so hard she nearly hurt her hip.

"Nnyaaaaaaaaa!!!"

And there it went. Her legs gave out from fear, and she couldn't move anything from the waist down. There stood Kazuhiho after all of his equipment had been destroyed, bravely restarting his adventure from a clean slate. It went without saying that this was the most terrible reunion imaginable.

I had never seen a cat burst out laughing like this.

The black cat had been quietly listening up until now, but now it rolled around on the bed hysterically, having reached its limit. The way we met must have seemed pretty amusing. But I had to say, the way it kept slapping my knee wasn't very cat-like. Seeing this, Marie took a sip of her still-warm coffee and shot the cat an unamused look.

"You should be quiet, or I'll have to throw you outside. This is just an embellished version of a story from long ago. I remember being much more proper, and I question whether I really screamed like that."

"Who knows? It was a long time ago, so maybe my memory is off. But for some reason, I don't really forget things when it comes to you."

I told her it was because my memories with her were precious to me without saying it out loud, and she replied, "Is that so?" while fidgeting around. I swallowed the words with a sip of coffee, then exhaled in the dimly lit room.

"I can't forget much about you, either. So, what was going on with your outfit that time? I couldn't forget it if I tried." Men were creatures that had to take steps forward even when completely naked. This was hard to explain to a properly-raised elf lady like her. Rather, it was more like I had to start over from zero, so I had no choice but to make a stone axe and a loincloth out of tree bark. Spears and bows would have come after that.

In any case, the black cat tugged on my sleeve to continue the story. It was a quiet night. The sound of me taking a deep breath could be clearly heard in the room, and then I began to speak of the past once again.

I was in a conundrum.

I had leaped out after seeing someone's shadow nearby, but when I appeared from the bushes, I found a young child curled up in front of me. She seemed to be about the same age as me, and I was concerned to see she was trembling hard with her shoulders in her hands, as if she had seen something horrifying. But this was no time for leisurely observations. It seemed the girl couldn't stand, and she was crawling toward a river that was flowing quickly due to the storm from the other day.

"I wonder if she's hurt or something."

I tossed the hand-made stone axe aside and ran over to the girl. Unlike in the real world, I took action quickly while in my dreams. After all, I would just wake up in Aomori even if something happened. It was a mistake to think in such an easygoing manner. The girl's face was contorted in fear as she turned around and screamed, "*Noooooooooo!*" in a shrill voice as soon as she saw me.

Wait, is this the girl I saw in last night's dream? She did have purple eyes... More importantly, she was terrified, as if there was a monster nearby.

"I get it, she must have been attacked by a monster!" Slightly regretting my decision to discard my axe earlier, I quickly crouched down on one knee and positioned myself to cover her back. But to my confusion, there seemed to be nothing after us.

"...Huh? There's nothing here?" No, that wasn't right. I sensed something from afar. I could clearly feel a monster's desire to kill me from somewhere. Birds flew off with a squawk, and I looked up to the waterfall in response. In that moment, a beautiful voice like ringing bells could be heard from behind me.

"*****!"

Maybe that was an incantation in Elvish. I heard a splash first, like a fish jumping in water. I looked to find a semi-transparent, ultramarine fish there, propelling itself through the air with its tailfin. I stared in awe at the wondrous sight, and then I heard several more splashes from around me.

“Oh, this is bad.” I had a pretty good sense for these things. Before I could even process the thought, I was riddled full of holes just like last night and died. Yup, I thought so. Considering how I was dressed, I must have looked pretty suspicious from an elf’s point of view.

I didn’t know how many times I had experienced the sight of my blood spraying into the air. Having gone through another nightmare scenario, I watched my limbs hang limply at my side as my consciousness faded away.

Rough breathing reverberated in the vicinity.

At the river near the elven dwelling, a young girl frantically kicked the ground with her sandals to scoot herself away from the corpse. She stared wide-eyed, breathing erratically, when something happened. The blood on the ground, as well as the corpse began to fade into semi-transparency, then started blinking with a mysterious light.

Then, it all vanished. It was like a candle had been blown out. It all happened so quickly.

The girl’s face grew as pale as a sheet. Feeling like she had seen something she wasn’t supposed to, she ran off with all color drained from her face. She cried hysterically as she ran.

Eventually, silence returned to the holy waterfall. Only the sound of a running river could be heard, the vivid, green moss and ferns wet from the splashing water.

Then, a leaf was trampled underfoot. It was a foot as thick as a barrel and covered in wiry hair. The creature exhaled from its nose with a beastly *huff*. It looked just like an animal as it sniffed around its surroundings.

§

I sat up, snapping awake. I was in a dark bedroom, the diffused moonlight coming in through the sliding paper door. Breathing heavily, I could feel copious amounts of sweat running down the back of my neck. I breathed in the smell of the tatami mats and let out a big sigh of relief.

“So, I just woke up from my dream...”

I was back in my family’s house in Aomori, having moved here from Tokyo. I had fallen asleep between my grandfather and grandmother, but it seemed a scary dream had made me jump to wakefulness.

Man, that took me by surprise. That girl was pretty impressive. I may have been completely naked, but being level 16, I still had a decent amount of vitality. She managed to instantly kill me twice in a row. How was she generating so much power? I considered this question as I maneuvered out of my blanket while taking care not to wake my grandfather.

I was used to waking up after dying, but my heart was beating so fast that I wouldn’t have been able to fall back asleep for a while. I walked down the hallway barefoot, then noticed the sound of water dripping from a faucet. I grabbed a cup and opened the refrigerator. The light was so bright that it hurt my eyes, so I took the bottle of apple juice I was looking for and quickly closed the fridge door.

“Man, I’m parched. I’m glad Grandpa bought this for me.”

I took a gulp. The cool apple juice felt good as it coursed through my heated body. The mixture of subtle sweetness and tartness was simply sublime. Then, I returned back down the hallway, cup in hand. Instead of going back to the bedroom, I opened the door next to it and sat out on the veranda. It was summer, so the nights of Aomori weren't too cold. It would be another half a month or so before the mosquitoes would start coming out in earnest. Looking up at the moon that seemed like a hole that had been cut into the sky, I let out a long sigh.

"I thought I was mistaken, but she really was controlling multiple spirits at once. Elves really are amazing." I had occasionally heard rumors of a powerful spirit user among the elves. But throughout all of my long journey in my dreams, this was my first time meeting one in person. My heart was beating like a drum, but it probably wasn't just out of fear.

"She was like a beautiful gem. It seems like she's around my age, but I wonder how old she is. I hear they live for a really long time, so I can't really tell."

Every house had their lights out, so the moon was very bright tonight. The clear moonlight illuminated the night almost as brightly as the sun did during the day. This was a sight I never could have witnessed in the big city. I sat there with my bare feet swinging, feeling myself grow calmer by the minute.

"I hope I didn't scare her, though. I should apologize if I see the same dream again."

But there was one problem to address before I could apologize. I had no idea what she was even saying to me.

"It must be the language of elves that I heard about in folk tales. That was my first time hearing it, but it sounded so pretty." I was captivated by the song-like language, which may have been part of the reason I ended up dying.

Hmm... I wanna learn how to speak the language of elves.

I had to start over from making my clothes again, and I had to make sure I was presentable this time. Things were about to get busy, but I was excited. I let out a yawn, then drank down the rest of my apple juice. Its refreshing sweetness still tasted delicious.

But I was still a child at this point, and I wasn't too great at critical thinking. And so, I repeated the cycle of getting defeated and coming back to life, not once stopping to consider her fear as I continued to approach her.

§

Huff, huff, huff...

Mariabelle pumped her arms and legs desperately as she ran and swallowed hard. The piles of leaves all over the ground provided cushion as she took each step in her sandals. She felt panicked from being unable to run as fast as usual, and it looked like she would trip any moment now.

“Ah!” The elf girl looked back while running and fell to the ground after all.

Her bundles of white hair fell to the ground before the rest of her body, and dust blew into the air as she landed. She found herself in a sunny spot without trees overhead, and she repeatedly took in rough breaths while laying flat on her stomach. Mariabelle had always spent her time reading books from the elder’s storage, so she was a slow runner and had less stamina compared to the others. Yet she picked herself back up and stared up at the brightening sky.

This forest had a long history.

Each of the trees extended far above, and the sky could be seen in the distance.

And here in this spot where light poured in between the foliage, there sat a fruit that seemed to have all of the sunlight for itself. A sweet scent emanated from this waterdrop-shaped fruit known as a lagi. The sunlight cast away the morning fog and illuminated the forest, and birds could be seen chirping and calling over their friends in search of breakfast. They would surely be able to enjoy fruits still wet with morning dew.

This was an elven village in an evergreen forest.

A land of peace and tranquility, where its inhabitants had created their own unique world by living and thinking like the spirits. This was why the unstable and dangerous humans weren’t allowed to enter... or so they thought.

Finally beginning to catch her breath, Mariabelle noticed a deer that was staring at her while munching away at some sprouts. She dusted the leaves off of her clothes and stood up, blushing slightly.

There was no time to mourn over the dirt on her clothes. She still felt eyes on her back, and when she squinted her purple eyes... she first caught sight of a stone axe between the trees.

The wielder was a half-naked man wearing nothing but a grass skirt and muttering, “Teach me, language,” which could have been words from the human language, but it didn’t make sense to her. His outfit was slightly different than before, now with several flowers adorned in his grass skirt... Was this his idea of dressing up? The man stood there staring at her, which only increased her sense of fear further.

“Nngh!” She picked up a nearby rock and tossed it at the intruder. It strayed wildly from her target, and she felt embarrassed as the half-naked man and wild deer stared at her. Then, she ran off again. Mariabelle was heading for the village to regroup with the others. Just a little farther, and the adults would be there waiting for her. With that thought, she roused her tired self to her feet.

The girl had one particular talent. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a talent in running, but she could intimately interact with spirits and have them help her friends. Spirits resided in all things and were rather fickle beings. The more one tried to look at them, they would melt away like a sugar cube in

water. Normally, one couldn't even see or touch one without proper training. But this girl and her father were different.

With those purple eyes looking over her back, she could see and recognize things others couldn't. From her perspective, she could see the golden glow of life itself and the beings known as spirits all around her.

"He really is a human... but there's something off about him." Mariabelle crinkled her cute little brows and muttered to herself. She then slowed down her gait. She realized that the human was maintaining a certain distance, just as he was before.

Mariabelle recomposed herself by taking deep breaths, then stared at the human child. She had sensed that something was off about him when she saw that the spirits around him were different from the others. She was so afraid of him earlier because she assumed he was a ghost of some sort, but she was feeling calmer now that she had some time to observe from a distance.

Mariabelle wiped the sweat from her forehead and kept an eye on him as she continued toward her village. He kept repeating what sounded like "Teach me, language," which made her wonder if he was trying to tell her something.

"Oh, well. The elder won't allow a human to wander in, anyhow. Just you watch. You'll meet an end fitting for a filthy human like yourself." The look in her eye was as cold as ice as she spoke under her breath.

This wasn't exclusive to elves, but residents of a colony often looked at outsiders with a critical eye. Allowing strangers into their midst hardly ever ended in positive results. There had been stories of feeding an outsider and treating him with kindness, only for him to end up being a spy that intended to invade their home. Such teachings were passed down from the adults in ways that were easy to digest, and being the diligent child she was, she had never thought to question them. In her mind, humans were evil beings that brought misfortune to all around them.

The sight of Mariabelle's village came into view. Thinking that the terror was finally coming to an end, she let out a sigh of relief and picked up her pace.

The visitor to this land would likely be surprised by the vast stretch of greenery here. Noctilucent fruits hung from vines connecting the large trees, and branches full of leaves grew freely above, completely covering the space overhead. The water flowing nearby was shockingly clear, and the stepping stone Marie jumped onto was entirely covered in moss. The elven village was a forest that clearly fit the fantastical creatures. Upon closer inspection, the barks of trees functioned as roofs, and it was clear that someone was living there.

A man's face peeked out from directly under an owl's nest.

"What is it, Mariabelle? Did you run into a boar or something?" the man asked.

"There was a human over there! Please take him down!" Marie said.

"All right, then I'll have to treat you to some human stew tonight." He saw her make a disgusted face and chuckled with amusement. He then grabbed a bow that was leaning against a wall and inspected its string. By the time the man stepped out of the entrance, Mariabelle was already gone. He scratched his head as he muttered to himself.

"A human, huh...? It's been a while. I guess the altar must've been broken from that storm, then." The hunter rubbed his chin, then looked in the direction Marie had run off to instead of the way she had pointed. "I need to ask her which altar was broken first."

He placed a leather hat deep on his head and began walking with the lithe movements of a well-trained hunter. He figured that if Mariabelle could escape, this intruder couldn't have been too much of a threat.

Meanwhile... Mariabelle had warned the adults of the danger while walking through the village, but their reactions were disappointingly unconcerned. They would have been more surprised if she had told them it was a boar. In fact, the boy appeared from behind the trees and tried to provoke her by waving, but the others were still unsurprised.

"Oh, she's right. It's a human child. How unusual to see one here. I wonder if he's lost?" a woman said.

"Hmm, he seems pretty well-behaved. Dear, we still had some sunebi left over, didn't we? I'll bet he'd love to eat some."

"Th-They're not even fazed by the fact that he's half-naked... Look, he's armed with an axe. He must have been possessed by a troll." She pointed to highlight the danger posed by the human, but they responded in a lukewarm fashion.

"A stone axe, huh...?" Well, it was true that he wasn't all too scary upon further inspection. Mariabelle shook her head.

"There's no time to be so complacent about this! That boy is no ordinary human, and he knows where our village is. I'm going to go alert the elder!"

They pointed out that she was the one who had brought the human here and wished her good luck, then looked back to where the human was. However, the boy was gone.

Perhaps the elves had lost their ability to detect danger after living in peace for so long. Such thoughts ran through Mariabelle's mind after seeing the poor reaction from the others. She tried warning a young man working the fields but was flabbergasted to find he was already sitting next to the human.

"Ohh, you learn quickly. Yup, that's how you peel the skin." The object being peeled was a specialty of the forest known as sunebi. When dried and peeled, they emitted a scent that was similar to that of spices, and they provided a nice flavor when used in soup or ground up.

But seeing that the human boy was the one doing the peeling, Mariabelle's face contorted as she stammered.

"Wh-Wh-Wha—?!"

Despite everything that was happening, the human boy just looked at her with a friendly smile. The field worker gave her a puzzled expression, which she found quite vexing.

"Hm? What's wrong, Marie?"

"Y-You're asking *me* what's wrong? What are you doing? Can't you see that's clearly a human? Why aren't you scared? You'll die if he attacks you." Mariabelle said with a tight expression, but... "*Him?*" the man replied. The elf girl nodded repeatedly. "I see..." he murmured and nodded with a serious expression.

"This human's pretty useful. Oh, no, not this one. You need to peel it in the opposite direction or you'll ruin it."

"Are. You. Listening to me?!" Mariabelle raised both her fists, then swung them down with her outburst.

Someone was standing nearby, watching this all unfold. The observer had long hair tied back in a tidy manner and held a grand staff in hand.

"Is that the one?" he asked the hunter beside him, then walked up to them.

The man with long, white hair tapped the ground with his staff. Mariabelle should have noticed him approaching and turned around, but she was so preoccupied with shouting.

"Are you really making this human do field work? Stop fooling around!" She didn't notice he was there despite the field worker pointing for her to look.

The hunter and elder looked at each other, unsure of what to do, but shrugged, figuring that she would notice eventually. Judging by the looks of it, there was no need to panic over this outsider. Humans did indeed have a barbaric side, but it didn't necessarily mean they were all that way. In fact, Mariabelle was the one acting disconcerting as she screamed and ranted.

"You won't be able to act so easygoing for long. I just sent out a skilled hunter to go after him. He's going to shoot you down in no time." She pointed her finger directly at the tip of the boy's nose, but he only cocked his head in confusion. A bow-wielding man who looked like a hunter was standing right behind her, so he may have been wondering if there was a different hunter somewhere in this village.

Mariabelle still hadn't noticed.

They sat down on the moss-covered stairs and began preparing tea with practiced hands. A Fire Lizard was summoned, and it slowly shuffled its four legs to crawl under the pot. They had lived with these spirits since long ago, so they knew what to do without direct orders. Of course, it was common courtesy to give them some fragrant wood as thanks.

As the Fire Lizard licked the piece of fragrant wood with its little tongue, the water began to boil in the pot, and the scent of tea leaves began to fill the air. The elf girl had been ranting on the entire time, but she began sniffing as she noticed the aroma. Then, she finally turned around.

"Ah, Mariabelle noticed us," the elder said.

"Then it seems I won our wager. You were too optimistic to think she would notice before the tea was done, Elder," the hunter replied.

"Yes, you got the better of me this time, hahaha!" he laughed jovially. The elder then pulled out some silver pieces from his chest pocket and handed a few to the hunter. Seeing this, Mariabelle was visibly angry as she stomped over to the two men.

"Father... I mean, Elder! Gambling is forbidden in the village! And not to mention, you're using human currency!"

"You look just like your mother, even when you make that face. And like her, I know you're actually quite gentle, despite how serious you seem."

The man who had the same white hair as Marie was the leader of this forest, known as the elder. The robe signifying his high ranking had purple embroidery stitched into it and matched his long hair well. The staff in his hand was made with holly, which was loved by spirits. He pressed it against the ground to push himself up to his feet. Now that its duty was complete, the Fire Lizard waved goodbye and vanished.

"Come, Marie. And that human over there, too." His voice was now stern, in complete contrast to his earlier demeanor. Despite the language barrier, his intent could be understood. The half-naked human boy stood up, brushed off the shells on his outfit, then walked closer. Mariabelle's face also grew solemn, and she shot the boy a glare before standing before the elder. She leaned her small body back in an arrogant pose.

"Hmhm, you've finally been caught. I'm sure you're about to be thrown into a pot with those sunebi you were peeling and... Ow! E-Elder, not my ear!" She flailed around as the elder pinched her ear. Seeing Mariabelle's eyes watering up, the elder let out an exhausted sigh.

"It appears my daughter has been quite rude to you. I don't recall raising her to be violent, but our teachings may have been a bit overstated," he said to the boy, who looked back at him with wide eyes. There was kindness under the sternness in his gaze. He stared for a moment longer, then spoke again. "Hm, did you not hear me?"

The boy finally opened his mouth.

"You can speak the universal language!"

"I have learned all of the main languages. After all, knowledge will never be a burden. Though in your case, it appears you have too little to burden you at all."

The boy seemed like he wanted to say something, but he stopped himself. He couldn't just explain that he had drowned in the river current and gotten torn to shreds by the man's own daughter. The elder watched him curiously for a moment, then turned around, instructing the boy to follow.

Far beyond the scattered lines of stepping stones and gentle upward slope, there was a building that seemed to be moss-covered ruins. There were many holes in the ceiling where sunlight shined through. As tree roots continued to infest the ruins, it would have eventually crumbled without

ever being repaired. No one knew whether this would have taken hundreds, or even thousands of years.

The boy's eyes sparkled as he stared at the silver ornaments and gemstones adorning the pillars. But considering how he simply enjoyed the view without trying to touch them, it seemed the admiration didn't merely come from their monetary value. Perhaps he was a fan of this fantastical sight.

The sound of heels clicking on the floor could be heard as they walked. There were cracks all over the building, and it was more than bright enough during the day. Weeds and flowers grew freely in the hall, and even birds had made their nests there. The boy again stared with fascination at the sight before him. Just then, the elf girl's stern voice rang out in the ruins.

"Elder, these are holy grounds! We can't let a human step foot in here!"

"Now, is he truly just a human? This is merely intuition, but it seems like he only partially exists in this world. Well, no matter. Take a seat there, you two." He gestured toward a stone table. It seemed to be used often, judging by the surface which was polished like a mirror, and there were fresh fruits in a basket placed there. He watched the two young ones sit on the chairs made of woven vine, then took a seat himself. Birds could be heard chirping from the sky, and after a time, the elder opened his mouth to speak.

"I am Ozbell, the elder of this village. First, I'd like to ask why you came here and the reason for your journey."

"I dove into a river to escape from a monster and ended up in this land. I was in the middle of my journey, but I happened upon this place by chance," I replied.

"I wonder if that truly is nothing but happenstance. No, I can tell it was a coincidence by looking at your expression. But this place had been sealed off so no one could ever enter from the outside. A storm may have just recently passed, but it's quite unlikely for the altar to have broken right before your arrival."

The elder contemplated some more. He placed a finger on a small wrinkle on his forehead, then looked up at the sky with his clear eyes. There, birds could be seen clinging on a big branch. The sight of the birds tweeting to converse with their peers was quite a peaceful sight. Ozbell thought for some time longer before speaking again.

"...Hm, I suppose there is no point in thinking about it now. More importantly, why did you go out of your way to reach this village if you have no particular objective? You could have left if you wished to."

"Well, I was hoping to learn Elvish, if possible." The boy replied without hesitation, and the elder couldn't help but smile at the desperate look on his face. It seemed he'd realized the boy was just as full of curiosity as he seemed. He let himself lower his guard one step further before opening his mouth again.

"I understand the excitement of learning an unknown language, and Elvish is a language that's closely tied to communicating with spirits. If you have the talent for it, you may even learn to control spirits someday."

The simple comment made the boy's heart dance with curiosity. It was quite amusing to see the boy's expression grow more and more cheerful in contrast to Mariabelle's, who sat there with furrowed brows and a pouty expression. Then, the elder thought of something. He secretly thought to himself that this may have been the perfect opportunity to resolve an issue that had been quite a headache.

"I don't have any money to offer, but I'll repay you with labor. So please, let me live here for a while!" the boy said.

"Very well, I accept. Oh, no need to look so confused just because I accepted so readily. There just so happens to be something that has been troubling me," the elder replied. The elder chuckled, then quietly glanced at the girl beside him. There sat Mariabelle with her hair tied in two bunches, confusion mixing in with her pouty expression as the two stared at her.

"She is quite adorable, as you can see, but I have spoiled her too much. Her hatred for humans has grown quite excessive as a result, and her physical growth has been much slower than that of her peers."

"What? Her growth? What do you mean by that?" the boy asked. The elder slowly began to explain.

Unlike humans, elves didn't grow simply by the passage of time. Due to their strong connection with spirits, their change in appearance was largely affected by their spiritual growth, rather than their age. They would remain a child if they had a juvenile mind, and those who lived for so long that they stopped thinking ended up perishing naturally in the corner of the forest.

And so, Ozbell had an idea. If she had the opportunity to interact with a human that came from the outside world, she could overcome her hatred for humans, learn about other cultures, and grow as a result. He put a pitcher of syrup from water up to his mouth, then turned his silver eyes toward the boy.

"As payment, you are to teach Mariabelle the language of humans. Hmhm, she is quite a stubborn girl who even refuses to learn from me. It won't be easy."

The boy happily accepted right away, but the latter half of the elder's statement gave him pause. The elder's gaze turned to Mariabelle, who had gone this far without trying to learn other languages. The girl met his eyes, then opened her mouth to speak.

"Elder, have you decided how to dispose of the human?"

"Yes, he will be spending time with you from now on. You are to teach him how to speak our language."

"...Huh?" Mariabelle asked.

"In exchange, you will have the opportunity to learn the language of humans. How wonderful for you. You will be able to read even more books

from the library. I imagine you won't be complaining about boredom anymore."

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?!"

Her beautiful smile immediately turned into an expression of shock, and the boy beside her nearly jumped from her sudden outburst. The birds also flew away in surprise, and only Ozbell maintained the smile on his face.

A man's finger touched a piece of crumbled stone.

Moss grew all over the area around the waterfall due to the humidity, but the cross section where the rock split open was brand new.

The hunter wearing the leather hat deep on his head looked completely different from earlier as he observed it like a hawk. As far as he could tell, there was nothing out of the ordinary. He was looking out for any signs of deliberate destruction. It seemed like the altar simply couldn't bear the storm from the other day after all these years. Having come to his conclusion, he slowly stood back up.

"Only the elder can fix it if it's this damaged. Hm, then I guess I'll be back to my primary job for a while." His lips curled into a smile.

His primary job was to keep an eye out for intruders making their way into the isolated village, and to intimidate or fatally injure them when necessary. Spellcasters would protect the village, and hunters would protect the spellcasters. They had continued this way of life for a long time now.

Not many could answer why things were arranged that way, however. The hunter turned, and the ruins where the elder currently was could be seen in the distance.

"Is this where Mariabelle was running around...? No, I don't think so. I doubt she has such thick hair."

He picked up a bundle of short fur that seemed to belong to some sort of beast. The hunter took one whiff of it, then turned toward the forest. He drew one arrow from his waist and readjusted his hat, his eyes growing even more like that of a bird of prey. Only he could feel the chill that suddenly fell upon the forest.

§

The weather in the mountains was a fickle thing. That was what was said since a long time ago, and now that I'd been living at the base of the Aomori mountains in the real world, I'd been experiencing it for myself. But this probably wasn't just a result of the terrain. The trees were so tall that it blocked off one's view of the sky, making it hard to notice changes in the weather right away. The shade of the sky gave a chilly impression, and the smell of rain was in the air.

"Maybe it's going to rain soon. But it was sunny until just recently..." I commented to myself, but it was obviously going to feel cold when all I was wearing was a grass skirt. I sneezed, and the purple eyes glaring at me were just as cold as the weather.

“*****” The girl said something in the language of elves as she turned around, so I couldn’t understand what she was saying. Judging by the look on her face, it probably meant, *“That’s what you get for being dressed like that,”* or *“I won’t forgive you if you give me some human disease.”* The girl, who turned her scowling face and walked away, went by the name of Mariabelle. She wasn’t the one who had told me, but the elder of the elves and Mariabelle’s father, Ozbell.

When I turned around, I saw that the ruins we were just at were cut off from view, with so many trees in the way. The area was rich with greenery, and butterflies were descending down from the sky. There were flowers sprouting from old, moss-covered logs on the ground. The butterflies must have been there to suck nectar out of them. They each gathered around to rest their wings and extended their straw-like mouths to feast.

I peered in and gasped quietly. There was a highly transparent body of water, and I was surprised that I could see the deep end with the sunlight piercing through. I could see ornamented rock walls covered in tree roots, but I couldn’t tell how far they extended. There was a completely different world on the other side of the water’s surface, and I couldn’t help but let out a *“Wow.”*

The elven village was amazing. I felt as if fairies could appear at any time here. The elder mentioned that it was usually closed off to outsiders. The difficulty of entering elven villages was even chronicled in written texts. I heard a storm had destroyed their altar, but I couldn’t help but be happy about the unfortunate event.

Just then, I finally noticed the cold look being directed my way. Way off in the distance, Mariabelle was staring at me, as if to say, *“Good, get lost then,”* and turned to walk away.

“Ah, wait, wait!”

It was a bad habit of mine to lose myself staring at fantastical scenery like this. This had been an issue for years now, so maybe it wouldn’t change even when I became an adult. Though, maybe that wouldn’t have been all too bad.

Mariabelle walked on with a quick pace, but I caught up quickly due to her lack of stamina. Her long, white hair wavered as she turned around. Her large eyes were as vivid as gemstones, and her skin was remarkably pale.

It was a shame that her displeased expression was taking away from her beauty. Why did she run out of breath so quickly when she lived in a forest like this?

I felt like she had been giving me a lot of reproachful comments, but I didn’t understand her language at all, and she had been ordered by the leader of the elves himself, Elder Ozbell. Resigned to her fate, she turned her nose away from me and continued walking.

I wondered if her clothes were handmade. The cloth covering her chest was hung by a string, which was dyed with a plain, pinkish color. Just below her pretty back was a little puff ball that seemed to be modeled after a

rabbit's tail. It bobbed around to the left and right in contrast to her angry steps, which I thought was adorable. As I continued watching the tail, we arrived at what seemed to be Mariabelle's residence.

Shadows fell around us. We had entered the shade of the trees. The trees around us were completely dry, but it was a bit odd to see a door with a handle in their midst. Just beside the entrance was a waist-high mushroom, and... wait, what? It was bigger than any mushroom I had ever seen before, and it just sat there like it was just a normal piece of furniture.

I tried to poke it, but got my hand slapped away.

"Tieto! Chitti-to, onodo!" Did she just scold me? I blinked and rubbed my hand. It didn't hurt, but it did take me by surprise. She was probably telling me not to touch it, but maybe "Tieto" meant something like, "Hey!" I wanted to figure out the conjunctions, too, but I didn't even understand the nouns yet, so that would've needed to come later. It wasn't a very grade schooler-like way of thinking, but not only was I into the main language of this world, I'd been studying its ancient languages, too. This was how I had entertained myself ever since I was young. Maybe I was different from the other kids in that sense.

I couldn't wait to learn to communicate. The idea of speaking to elves who were reminiscent of fairy tales in their own language was fascinating and had me excited from the bottom of my heart.

I wondered if she would have been surprised if I told her I knew a smattering of phrases in the language of monsters.

The door creaked open, exposing a dimly lit staircase leading underground. But when the girl uttered something, a light source suddenly appeared out of nowhere. A shadow danced through the air and left light particles in its wake: a light spirit.

I did a double take, unsure if I'd really seen what I thought I did.

No, it was far too quick.

I had seen people who could control spirits before, but I'd heard that the spirits were rather fickle beings. It should have been nearly impossible to summon one so easily.

"Liesom!" The girl left me standing there in my surprise and called down the stairs. Then, the door at the far end opened, and a woman appeared. She looked so similar to Mariabelle that it was immediately obvious she was her mother. But her hair was in complete contrast with her daughter's: jet black and wavy, with her forehead exposed. Her eyes were amber, like the flames of a burning torch.

The woman gasped lightly, then pulled something out of a pouch next to the door. She drew a knife that extended to around her elbow, its blade gleaming with the illumination from the light spirit.

Before I knew it, I was rolling around the grassy field. I mean, the woman immediately rushed up the stairs and slashed at the spot where I had been standing just a moment ago. The blade made swishing sounds as she swiped through the air, and my eyes bulged in their sockets.

“W-Wait! Mariabelle, Mariabelle! What did you just say to her?! Did you explain who I am?!” I desperately called out to the girl, who was just staring off in the distance as if she couldn’t hear me. A knife danced before my face, blocking my view. The light spirit from earlier had melded into the blade, and I could see a gleam in the woman’s amber eyes. The earring on her earlobe was a matching amber, and her mouth curled into a combative smirk.



I gestured with my hands, pleading for her to calm down. I wasn't a bad guy, nor was I their enemy. I just wanted to have fun in my dreams by learning their language and culture.

In response, she extended her toes and executed a sharp kick. Her dress had a long slit going down its length, and her pale thigh was revealed in the sunlight.

Although she was in heels, her thighs were well-developed from the wilderness and capable of delivering a kick that could pierce through my abdomen. I rolled to the side in a panic, but such a kick would have snapped me awake in one shot. Maybe she was a trained fighter. The elder was a mild-mannered intellectual, and Mariabelle wasn't the athletic type, so this really had come out of left field.

The woman held herself up with one hand on the ground, and a follow-up kick came straight for the back of my head. Her muscles bulged, and her foot accelerated with such speed that it surely would have shattered my skull.

I gasped, then managed to stick my hands out and touch her knees. I tried to soften the blow somewhat, but it was no use. The unstoppable impact came rushing toward me, and I forced myself to do a sort of back hip circle around her leg to avoid the hit. I somehow managed to end up on the other side of her kick, and her leg went veering away from me with breakneck speed.

There was a moment of relief, but I found myself upside-down in the air. A pair of breasts covered in cloth and bare skin, moist with sweat, appeared right in front of my face. I was so close that I could smell the sweat on her body when the eyes of burning torches looked down on me.

"Olou-chitti-ijavu."

Later on, I had found out that the words meant, "Hello, and goodbye." I became painfully aware of the fact that it was important for me to learn their language. There was no way I could have cleared up this misunderstanding if I couldn't convey my thoughts. Though, I didn't even know if it was a misunderstanding that was causing the issue in the first place.

The woman grabbed my grass skirt, and the knife in her other hand came right for me. The blade was so well polished that I could see my own horrified face in the reflection before it made a beeline for my heart. I only had time to blink before it was all over.

I had discarded my stone axe long ago, and I really didn't want to go back to sleep for the third time today. And so, I immediately shouted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Nnngh! Ozbell!" As soon as she heard the name, she snapped out of her cruel grin and blinked, her knife frozen in mid-air. It was only a few millimeters away from opening a hole in my chest. My heart was beating like a drum. The woman lifted me with one hand, raising me right up to her

beautiful face. She then said, "Ozbell?" with a dubious expression and cocked her head.

Her lips were quite vivid even without lipstick, much like her daughter's. I nodded continuously, repeating the phrase "Ozbell" over and over again. The woman's brows furrowed, and then her gaze turned to Mariabelle.

Words were important, indeed. Even if we didn't understand each other, her husband's name had to ring a bell. Such was my thinking as I shouted the word, and it seemed to have worked out. Mariabelle muttered something, as if to make excuses, and her mother's face grew more and more stern as she listened.

It seemed like I was off the hook. I wanted to let out a sigh of relief, but the grass skirt was digging into my skin, and I was desperately holding on to it as it gradually slid upward.

Oh, how I wished to learn their language. I wanted to learn it then and there. Then I could have begged her to put me down. And so, in that moment, my grass skirt snapped off and the misunderstanding was cleared at the same time.

§

What kinds of dreams did people see when they went to sleep at night? Maybe dreams of flying through the air, using ancient magic, or spending time as a king? Or maybe dreams of becoming a monster themselves, wreaking havoc wherever they went. Though, I guess that did sound fun, too. As for me... it may have been hard to believe, but I was dreaming about laying butt naked in the rain.

Afterward, Mariabelle and her mother entered the house, and the door was closed behind them. Immediately after it was shut, the rain suddenly turned into a downpour. I was surprised to find that the raindrops didn't feel cold. In fact, they were rather warm. But for some reason, my tears nearly flowed out along with the rain.

"I wonder if everyone else has dreams like this, too..." I could almost hear someone's voice pointing out that they most certainly didn't.

After laying there for some time, the door burst open. Mariabelle appeared, holding her rear and crying out loud, along with the black-haired woman from earlier.

The mother, who had been scolding her daughter just a moment ago, walked out holding an outfit made of cloth. She then glanced up at the sky and looked rather surprised. She hurriedly reached over to the large mushroom next to the entrance of her house and bopped it, expelling white spores into the air.

I let out a soft gasp. The floating spores absorbed water, turning into a jelly-like substance. And yet, they remained hovering in the air, turning into what looked like transparent plastic umbrellas.

"Ela! Levo-imohk!" She called out loudly, and she splashed through the water as she rushed to my side. The strange floating thing soon covered me as well, and the sound of rain didn't sound so close anymore.

I was amazed. That was no ordinary mushroom in their house; it functioned as an umbrella. I wondered how it was able to stay afloat even after absorbing water, though. As I absently stared at the hovering thing, the woman began wiping down my body.

"Ilou, ilou, zulokut?" I still had no idea what she was saying. But unlike earlier, there was an apologetic look to her amber eyes. She was as terrifying as a demon when she was attacking me, but I wondered if she was a kind person at heart.

The way she gestured for me to raise my arms did remind me of a kind mother, and it tickled a bit when she wiped down my armpits as I obeyed. She then pulled the cloth garment over my head and quickly did the buttons up for me.

"Oh, it's warm... Thank you!" We didn't understand each other's words, but we managed to get by with gestures. I bowed my head, and she wrapped another piece of cloth around my head and began wiping some more. Her face was right before mine as she continued to talk, and I felt my cheeks grow hot from her beauty. The woman smiled gently and pointed at herself.

"Sharsha," she said softly. She repeated it again, then a third time, and I finally realized what the word meant. Sharsha must have been her name. I repeated her name, taking care to pronounce it correctly, and her smile grew wider. Her amber eyes stared at me expectantly, as if to say, *"Now it's your turn."*

I had introduced myself to strangers many times before. I usually greeted them with a "Hello, nice to meet you." And in the end, we always parted with a "Goodbye." This realization made introductions feel a bit lonely, but before I knew it, I no longer feared taking the first step.

"Sharsha... Kazuhiho. My name is Kazuhiho."

"Kazuio? Hehe... Iizie, imetiv." She stuck her tongue out, then made biting motions with her teeth. Maybe she was laughing about biting her own tongue because it was hard to pronounce. The lovable expression on her face made me burst out into laughter, too.

Maybe it was because I was still barefoot, but Sharsha picked me up in one arm and began to walk.

Mariabelle was by the entrance with her nose still red, and Sharsha said something to her in a stern tone. The little girl looked downcast, then looked up at me with her big eyes. She muttered something that could have been a word of apology. Sharsha gently patted her daughter's white hair, then picked Mariabelle up in her other arm with ease.

Seeing her lift us so casually when we were the size of older grade schoolers, my preconceived image of elves was completely shattered in that moment. I was even more surprised when Mariabelle's face popped out from the other side. We were a lot closer than we had ever been before, and I found myself in awe of her adorable face and eyes like precious gemstones.

She must have gotten quite the scolding earlier. Red-nosed and with tears welling up in her eyes, she looked so childlike as she clung to her mother. We still couldn't understand each other's words, and we didn't know anything about each other but our names. But she looked no different from a human child as she tightly held on to her mother's chest. And so, I extended my hand to communicate through gestures rather than words. I figured their custom for making up wouldn't be too different from humans.

She gingerly reached out her hand, then touched my fingertip. Someday, there would be a time when we would bid each other farewell. Even so, I still loved meeting people. I could feel her warmth as she held onto my finger, and I naturally broke out into a smile.

Her tight lips loosened in turn, finally curling up into a faint smile of her own. Just seeing that little smile made me feel like talking to her was worthwhile, even if we would inevitably have parted ways someday. Though, I had to admit it was quite bold of me to talk to her, dressed the way I was.

Just as Sharsha was about to pass through the doorway, she changed direction for some reason. Just as the rain had suddenly started to fall, the large beads of water abruptly stopped, sunlight beaming down from the sky instead.

Mariabelle, Sharsha, and I each let out a small cheer of joy. Having absorbed plenty of water, the forest began releasing heat from the ground, emitting a faint haze. The stripes of light and shadow made by the trees obstructing the setting sun made for a picturesque sight. The rainbow in the distance only added to the wondrous view.

Looking up, I noticed that the inflated jelly spores had started shedding their excess moisture. Once they lost the water weighing them down, they floated up into the air. Maybe that was how the mushroom spread seeds, along with water, in order to propagate. I couldn't help but admire what an ecological umbrella it was.

It seemed they were going to let me spend my time freely in their house. Having received some new clothing, I stared blankly and learned about how elves spent their daily lives.

I wouldn't really have called their house underground, but it was more like it was dug out of a slope of a hill. It took in fresh air from the chimney extending above ground, and sunlight poured in from the various holes placed throughout its design.

Apparently, they weren't bothered by the little things, because water easily poured into their home whenever it rained, like earlier. There were waterways on either side of the hallways to channel out the water, and I was shocked by the difference in culture compared to my own.

"This is amazing. How is there no mold growing all over the place?" I looked around as I pondered out loud. There was a rounded roof over the dim hallway that was made of some sort of hardened mud or clay. It was rough to the touch, but didn't smell too strongly of soil, and I was surprised to find that it didn't seem like it would crumble at all.

Then, I noticed there were little holes bored into the wall. I stared, trying to figure out what their purpose could be.

“Kazuhiho...” Just then, a little girl’s face peered in from the other side of the hallway. She stood there with her long, white hair hanging down from her head, and her grumpy expression from earlier had softened up from us having made up.

A light spirit rested on her shoulder as she walked up, and she looked up at the same wall I was. She cocked her head, obviously trying to figure out what I was staring at, but then her eyes met my own. Light spirits flew into the air behind Mariabelle’s back, then settled into the holes in the wall... It seemed the purpose of the holes was to provide lighting.

The dim hallway suddenly turned just as bright as the one in Japan, which made me question whether the life of an elf was primitive or modern.

“They seem to live more comfortably than humans, at least. I didn’t see many people working during the day.”

The hallway was remarkably long, which was probably also due to a difference in culture. Instead of partitioning rooms with walls, maybe they deliberately put distance between each room as a countermeasure for the lack of durability in the earthen structures.

I let out impressed noises while admiring the architecture some more, and Mariabelle’s expression began to turn bemused in contrast. Her eyebrows crinkled, and she stared at me as if she was wondering if there was something wrong with me. Then, she reached out and presented... a pillow? The rounded piece of fabric definitely looked like a pillow, but there were removable wooden buttons on it.

She went on to explain something and handed me the object, and I was surprised by just how warm it was.

Ah, it was basically a hot-water bag. I could hear something sloshing around inside, which I figured was hot water. I got scolded when I tried to shake it up, so apparently I wasn’t supposed to treat it roughly. There was so much I didn’t know about their culture. This was getting exciting. Not to mention, Mariabelle was very emotive and easy to read, so just observing her reactions was pretty entertaining.

I held the object like a baby in both arms, and Mariabelle opened the door for me. There was a space there of about four tatami mats in size, and the floor was made with tightly paved stones, unlike the other room. The humidity was more stable here as a result, making it more comfortable to spend time in.

“This looks like a bedroom. Is this where I get to stay, by any chance?” I asked Mariabelle while gesturing, and it seemed she understood the gist of what I was asking. Her brows furrowed cutely, and she said something in a dissatisfied tone.

There were wide window frames set in the walls, but of course there was no such thing as glass here. It seemed they used the nearby boards to block the night wind when it got too chilly. There was a wooden chair and a small

desk right below it, with several books laid out, as well. I glanced at them to find the covers were written in completely unfamiliar text, and then I noticed another book...

"Oh, it's written in the common language. This is the main language of the western region. So that other one must have been written in the language of elves. Hmm, the letters look pretty, but they're written in such a unique style. There are so many breaks between the words, and... oh, sometimes there are letters written in two rows stacked on top of each other. I wonder, are they supposed to be pronounced at the same time?"

There was no stopping my curiosity now. Come to think of it, the way the elf ladies spoke had a beautiful ring to it, like they were singing a song. Maybe that was how they pulled off such complex pronunciations. I wanted to study it in detail, but I had my hands full with the water bag, so I reluctantly stepped away from the books.

"Oh, I put this on this shelf? I totally thought it was a hot-water bag. Wait, why are there so many bird feathers here?" I heaved the object onto the shelf, and my question was soon answered. As the sun began to set, a wild bird came down out of nowhere and poked its head in through the window.

Our eyes met. The bird cocked its head, as if confused by the fact that there was a human here. Then, it entered the room, seemingly shrugging it off, and settled onto the mistletoe above the shelf. The bird folded its wings and started grooming itself with its beak, and several more wild birds joined in.

One bird rested on the hot-water bag while another groomed itself on the mistletoe, and the room grew more lively as the sun set further. The room became filled with the smell of blankets drying in the sun and fretful clucking noises.

"Whoa, this place is pretty packed now. This is a crazy sight." I turned around and nearly jumped. More birds were peering into the room from the window. They had an exchange with Mariabelle, which I figured boiled down to, "You're full?"

"Yes, you'll have to try some other place."

Hmm, elven culture really was different from our own. If it was as interesting as it seemed, I would have loved to stay here long-term. And so, I started to put together a plan on how to spend my time in the dream world.

I spent my first night at the elven village in a room full of birds and sleepy clucking noises.

From my bed, I could see the clear moonlight illuminating the trees outside, and the howl of beasts could be heard in the distance. I felt like I was inside of a picture book, and the mystical air of this place proved the texts I had read weren't wrong.

But just as I was able to enter, an evil entity had stepped foot into this peaceful village. It breathed heavily, staring down at the village from a hill above.

The creature's massive frame began to move forward, but as soon as I fell asleep and woke up from my dream, it froze in place.

It was the monster known as Avenger. My meeting with this beast wasn't until some time later.

§

I could hear a bird chirping.

I heard that birds liked to peck at eyelids and earlobes, for some reason. Supposedly, it felt good to bite flesh that was just the right amount of thinness, squishiness, and warmth. Maybe it was fun for the birds, but it felt very ticklish for me. The bird hopped onto my lip, which was even worse.

I opened my eyes slightly, and I saw the bird's colorful feathers puff up in surprise. It then cawed and flew away. I blankly watched through the simple windows of empty frames in the earthen walls as it disappeared to find some breakfast.

I raised both hands into the air in the now-empty room. My drowsiness vanished in that moment, so I put on my shoes and walked on the well-polished stone pavement. The blue sky beyond the window was a vivid reminder of summer vacation, and I could see birds flying around the evergreen trees. They seemed to be full of energy from resting in warmth and comfort.

"Good, I got to pick up where I left off. I would've been pretty sad if I woke up somewhere else."

I usually camped outside at night, but fortunately, I was given some bedding to sleep with. Not to mention, I was in the village of elves. Even during class at elementary school, I couldn't wait to spend more time back in this world. I couldn't focus in school as a result, and my teacher had scolded me twice about not paying attention. And so, I dove under my blankets as soon as I ate dinner so I could enjoy more time in my dreams.

"Nn, the forest smells so refreshing. You won't find anything like this even in Aomori... Huh?"

Just then, a young girl's head, with her white hair bound like rabbit ears, came into view. Her arms and back were exposed, and she wore less accessories than yesterday, maybe due to it being so early in the morning.

She yawned out loud as she picked something off of some nearby vines with an annoyed expression. Her clothes were rather thin, but maybe she didn't feel the need to cover up. Mariabelle then noticed me and made a face. If I had to describe it in a word, it would probably have been, "*Ugh.*" This house was built into a slope, so there was elevated land on the other side of the window. Mariabelle stomped over with wide steps, and I could only see her feet when she got closer. She then crouched down, her pale thighs in full view as she peered down at my face.

The basket under her arm was full of what appeared to be beans, and her cute face was ruined by the way she was puffing out her cheeks in anger. Actually, she still looked cute making that face, too.

It sounded like she was complaining about something as she glared at me with narrowed eyes, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. Her badmouthing wasn't getting through to me in the slightest, and I just kept smiling at her. When your feelings didn't get through to the other side, it was essentially the same as being ignored, which could have been quite frustrating. But what if there was a solution to our little issue?

"So, Mariabelle. If you want to complain to me, there's something we need to overcome first. Do you know what that is?"

Of course, she didn't understand what I had just asked her, either. But I picked up the books on the common language and Elvish in hand, which should have helped her see what I was getting at. I was telling her that she could only berate me by using the common language.

She narrowed her pale purple eyes even further and glared at me in silence for some time. It was kind of weird seeing a cute girl crouched outside the window like this. Just then, the young girl stood up, turned on her heel, then walked away.

It seemed the elder was right about her being kind of difficult. Mariabelle stuck her tongue out at me, then disappeared into the forest. Now alone, I let out a deep sigh. Teaching each other to speak our respective languages wasn't going to be easy.

The door creaked open.

The dim hallway reminded me of sewers that had existed in the west since the olden days. But here, there were holes in the wall around the corner where light could pour in from the outside. The lighting allowed me to navigate my way through without bumping into anything, and I made it out to the brighter area on the other side. This area seemed to be the kitchen, where plenty of sunlight filled the room through the windows.

"Onn, Kazuhiho?" I turned around to find the black-haired woman Sharsha standing there. She, too, was an elf, and her long ears were visible on either side of her friendly smile.

"Good morning, Sharsha."

I was indebted to her for lending me the bed last night. I bowed my head as I greeted her. Sharsha was sitting on a chair with her legs crossed, and she thought about something for a moment before saying, "Gunilom-du," with clear pronunciation so I could understand.

"Guneelam...?"

"Nnhn, gunilom-du." It seemed she was teaching me the Elvish morning greeting.

I smiled with excitement and sat in front of her as she was peeling some beans. They were the food items known as sunebi that were being peeled yesterday. Mariabelle must have handed them to her mother through the window after picking some earlier, then went off to play afterward.

"Gunilom-du, Sharsha."

"Toligg! Gunilom-du, Kazuhiho." Her expression brightened into a flowery smile. She seemed to understand that I wanted to help her with her task, and she placed the basket between us. She wasn't wearing a dress like yesterday, and her exposed thighs were almost too radiant to look at. It was still early in the morning, so this must have been her sleepwear.

She was quite terrifying when I had met her yesterday, but she seemed like a completely different person as she smiled in the sunlight. There was something very motherly about her expression, and I found myself staring in awe for some time.

I was shocked. I didn't realize just how cute elves were when they smiled. How cute would Mariabelle have been if she smiled, too? Such thoughts played over in my mind as I peeled sunebi with Sharsha and she taught me how to say the names of the objects around us. By the way, I also found out that elves didn't eat breakfast, and it was some time later that I learned what sunebi tasted like.

Thud, thud, thud!

Our fun language lesson was interrupted by the rough sound of pounding at the door. Sharsha seemed to sense something, and her expression suddenly grew grave. She pulled some clothing out of a nearby shelf, then quickly donned them and walked up the stairs.

I followed her long legs and saw the door creak open. Sunlight poured in from the opening, casting aside the shadows of the staircase.

There stood a man with the brim of his hat deep over his eyes and a large bow at his back. It was the man who had been next to the elder yesterday. Judging by his outfit, he must have been a ranger of some sort.

The man quietly said something to Sharsha, who gasped in response. Although I couldn't understand what they were talking about, I could feel the tension in the air. Something must have been happening in this peaceful elven village. I felt my heartbeat grow louder.

The two exchanged a couple more words before turning their backs toward each other. Sharsha swiftly rushed down the stairs, then picked up the steel-colored weapons hidden behind the door. I watched, open mouthed, as she put two of the weapons behind her waist and heaved a medium-sized bow onto her shoulder.

Why was she arming herself? Had something appeared close by? I recognized the mood in the air; danger was closing in. Sharsha was acting just as she had when she attacked me thinking I was a threat to Mariabelle. But yesterday's incident was a misunderstanding, and she had gone back to her usual self after the situation was cleared up. I approached Sharsha from behind as she strapped herself with black leather belts all over.

"Sharsha, I'll help, too. Mariabelle is in danger, isn't she?"

"..."

I couldn't help but swallow my breath when I saw her eyes: eyes of amber, like burning torchlights. They stared right into my own, and it felt like she was mulling over my words as she observed me.

I had spoken to her in the common language. There was no way she understood me. But it seemed to me that she was highly capable when it came to battle. Such people tended to have sharp senses, and it was usually easier to communicate with them about matters regarding combat.

Sharsha wordlessly reached into the hidden compartment and pulled out a heavy dagger. The hilt was made with animal tusks, and the grip felt comfortable in my hand. The weapon reached from my wrist to my elbow, which was just the right length.

I may not have looked like it, but I was pretty adept with this sort of weapon. I had quite a bit of experience dealing with monsters.

I swung the blade around, as if to demonstrate exactly that. This may have been a familiar sight for movie fans. The knife danced around like magic, swishing through the air as sunlight reflected off of the blade. I had always admired how they used the knife like it was part of their body, and I spent a lot of time practicing during my solo journey. People usually underestimated me because of my sleepy-looking face. It seemed I was finally reaping the fruits of my labor, because the look in Sharsha's eyes changed noticeably. She nodded, then pointed at me as if telling me to stay put. I wondered what that was about, but then she pressed her lips against my chest where my heart was.

She exhaled, and the somewhat sweet scent made my heart beat louder in surprise.

She must have been speaking in the language of spirits. Her eyes were closed as she stayed there with her lips touching my body, and it felt as if her warm breath was going to fill my lungs.

I didn't understand what this ritual was for, but it seemed it was something only she needed to know.

She moved away with the liteness of an animal, and the preparations were complete.

"Ditaats-niiteh," she called out sharply, and we set out to search for Mariabelle. According to what I heard later on, her last statement meant, "Now, let's begin." She grinned at me with an intensity that left me fascinated by her beauty.

§

The Fire Lizard, with its stubby limbs, a plump belly, and beady eyes, was one of the most useful spirits in the forest. When summoned, it wasn't for barbaric purposes such as incinerating an enemy, but usually for heating up food or tea. This morning was no different, and the spirit was summoned in a forest surrounded by fresh verdure, where girls were conversing.

Breakfast was not a part of elven culture. But they were fans of snacking, which was apparent from the sweet scent in the air.

"I can't believe it. There's actually a human male in my house," a girl said with an annoyed expression as she poked the roasting nut known as noran with a stick. It was covered in white smoke, and juices dripped down occasionally to sizzle against the hot plate. They were pungent when eaten raw, but they melted into a mildly-sweet, viscous substance not unlike honey when roasted.

Marie looked at her friends who had gathered for snack time, seeking their agreement. The girls, whose eyes were just as big as Marie's, brightened into cheery expressions. Though, it wasn't so much because they agreed with her, but because they were excited to get some hot news in the otherwise peaceful and boring forest.

"No way! So the rumor about you living with some guy is true?!" The girl asking with a surprised look on her face was known as Pamella. She had a talent for archery despite her short stature, and she had been learning how to hunt with the adults as of late. Her red hair stuck out freely on her head, and there still weren't a lot of garments covering up her body.

"Like, I, said. That's not how it is. My father just decided it on his own..."

"So you're, like, betrothed to each other? Did you already do the deed then, Marie?" The girl with the honey-colored bob cut was named Nike, and she sometimes spewed venom despite her mild appearance and demeanor.

Whenever they finished their chores in the morning or evening, the girls gathered here with their food of choice. Enjoying the snacks together as they conversed about nothing in particular was part of their daily routine.

"Oh, please. This is our naive Marie we're talking about. I'll bet she messed with the human for no reason, and the elder made her watch over him to teach her a lesson."

"Ahaha, that's hilarious! I can totally picture that happening." The two girls realized they were spot on as Marie winced with each comment, and they burst out into laughter.

Once they settled down, they picked up the roasted noran to check if they were done cooking. The Fire Lizard had an appetite even when sound asleep, and it caught the empty noran shell with both hands. Pieces of fragrant wood were its favorite, but anything scented would have done. The spirit wasn't too picky.

Freshly-roasted noran were one of the few sweet treats that could be found during this season. Their mildly sweet scent filled the air as their juices oozed out. The girls filled their mouths with noran and smiled as they enjoyed the soft texture and sweetness.

"So tasty! Too bad they're so pungent and give you heartburn when you eat too much."

"Of course they're tasty, I picked 'em. So, Nike, what happened with that owl's egg you told us about?" Pamella asked.

"About that, my dad tried to move its nest to some place higher up..."

Marie's eyes widened. She couldn't believe the conversation was moving on to some egg when there was a human in the village. Owls were kind of cute, but they weren't even rare here.

"H-Hey, you two! This is a human we're talking about! Don't you care that a race that's so barbaric, vulgar, uneducated, and full of lust is here in our forest?!" Marie's two friends looked at her blankly. They turned to each other, then asked with confused expressions.

"Has anything changed other than the fact that there's a human here? Like, did he go around causing a disturbance or attack you?"

"Huh? No, nothing like that, but..."

If anything, Marie and her mother Sharsha were the ones acting wildly. The boy just desperately avoided Sharsha's attacks, and Marie didn't recall seeing him fight back or complain.

Marie remembered taking his hand when he reached out to her, presumably as a sign that he wanted to be her friend. She felt his warmth then, and she could tell from the feel of his hand that he was a swordsman despite his youth. In that moment, she realized he was just a normal, young boy.

"...Maybe he wasn't a ghost after all," she uttered to herself. Mariabelle wrinkled her brows, a puzzled expression forming on her face.

She had seen such a strange sight just a few days ago. That boy had perished before her eyes, then reappeared before her as if nothing had happened. She was the one who had the spirit attack him, and more than once, at that. There was no way she had mistaken him for a lookalike. Marie went silent as she fell deep into thought, and her friends looked at her with confusion.

"So, is he really handsome or something?"

"N-No. He has a forgettable, sleepy-looking face," Marie replied. The girls made a noncommittal noise, looked at each other, and nodded.

"In that case, there's nothing else to ask about that, really. So, were you able to move the owl's nest?" Pamella said.

"Oh, right. The thing is, I heard there was a huge animal that's never been seen in the forest before, so my dad wanted to postpone it to tomorrow..."

"Forget about the owl, you two! More importantly, let's figure out a way to drive the human out of the forest! If we don't do something, I'm going to be forced to learn the human language," Marie said with urgency, but they looked at her as if they couldn't understand why that was such a bad thing. Pamella scratched her red hair as she sat cross-legged, exposing her bare feet to the sunlight.

"But the elder has been pushing for more interaction with humans. Weren't you saying you wanna read more texts, too? Why not just use this as an opportunity to learn a new language?"

"I do like reading books, but I don't want to read something written by humans."

"Huh. But there are books on sorcery in the elder's storage, too."

Marie's long ears twitched. For her, her endless search for knowledge was always related to sorcery. She had always avoided humans and their foul culture, but sorcery, having been created in the ancient times, was a different matter.

Much like the Fire Lizards, which were summoned from a vague and abstract realm, Spirit Magic was just something she was able to use by instinct. But according to her father, sorcery existed upon logical and consistent rules. Supposedly, it worked by creating a base, gradually empowering it to increase the heat, and then activating it, like the moment a puzzle was solved.

That was how it was explained to her during bedtime, and she had to admit that she was quite curious to learn more. Nothing was more interesting to her than something that was completely unknown. But Marie shook her head in denial.

"Why do you hate humans so much, Marie?" Nike asked.

"Why? Well..." Marie's purple eyes widened at Nike's question, posed in her usual, mild-mannered tone.

She just noticed that the morning mist had cleared, and the early morning hours were about to end. A warm breeze blew by. Having gone silent, Mariabelle dismissed the Fire Lizard and parted from her friends.

"Maybe you act like you hate them because you're actually interested in them." Her friend's words echoed in her mind as she walked down a footpath.

A storm had passed just recently, and broken trees were visibly strewn along the way. The elves lived a peaceful life thanks to the deep forest, but their protector had taken some small injuries.

Her friend's comments were still stuck inside of Marie's head. She couldn't even deny it before she realized it made sense. Mariabelle told herself it couldn't have been true as she walked along, touching the grass growing along the path as she did so. Her tail and hairstyle, modeled after rabbits, appeared a bit more downcast than usual. It seemed more like she was trying to reason through this doubt nagging at her, rather than going for a simple walk.

"Am I really so hung up on him because I'm interested in him?"

She had been so frustrated at her friends for being totally disinterested by the human's arrival. But when she considered this question, it changed the entire reason for her attitude.

It wasn't that her friends were dull or anything. They hadn't reacted because they weren't really interested in the first place. If the human had attacked the village, their reactions would have been completely different. They would have properly treated him as a "dirty human" if that was the case. Mariabelle's friends were realists, and their response was completely different from hers.

"Why am I so annoyed by this?"

She entered a section of woods with a nice view, but the deer that were usually present were nowhere in sight. She was in the mood to see their innocent little eyes, so she found herself a bit disappointed by their absence.

Mariabelle could hear the sound of water flowing in the distance. Humidity and the fresh smell of morning hung in the air. If she had walked a bit further, the waterfall would have been waiting for her. It was the same waterfall where she had originally met that strange boy. As she decided to go there, she noticed someone was watching her. Mariabelle turned to find the black-haired boy who had just crossed her mind.

"Ah! You've been following me!"

"...!" But the boy spoke to her with words she couldn't understand, moving closer to her with a more aggressive gait than usual. There was a strange intensity to his sleepy-looking face, and Mariabelle found herself shrinking back a bit.

"Wh-What do you want?! You don't scare me! Humans are just foul, and I want you to get out of my forest!"

The boy shouldn't have been able to understand her words in Elvish, but the boy reached out with both hands and shoved Mariabelle. He was deceptively strong for his small frame, and Mariabelle lost her balance as she confirmed in her mind that he was an enemy after all. She landed on her rear and held herself up with her arm so she wouldn't roll away, but she cut her palm on a small, sharp rock in the process.

"Ow! What kind of man are you, hurting a girl like this?!" She mustered her courage to glare at the boy, but she fell speechless when she saw the scene before her. A metallic clash rang out, and sparks flew into the air as a battle raged.

The massive creature blocking the sunlight couldn't have been described as a bear. Its head was full of fangs like a worm, drool pouring out of its mouth. A dagger was sticking out of one of its murderous eyes.

The creature swung down with an arm that was like a sharpened pile. The boy blocked the attack with a knife, and sparks flew from the blade. The ground shook as its arm sank into the earth. It had landed right where Mariabelle had been standing just a moment ago.

§

I let out a deep breath.

I had heard stories of a monster known as "Avenger." Supposedly, its drive to kill was so high that it would track anyone who injured it down across mountains to have its revenge. And there it was before me.

Its upper body was covered in thick, black fur and far more developed than that of a bear. Its eyes were as red as blood. It roared from a mouth full of sharp, uneven teeth.

The dagger I had thrown at it a few days ago was still stuck in one of its eyes. A flame burned in the one remaining eye as it remained locked onto

me. The creature was still just as terrifying as I'd heard, and I noted that some rumors could be trusted after all.

"Now, what to do... I've never faced a monster with an estimated level of 38 like this one."

That was because I stood no chance. The only skill I had was Reprisal, and all it could do was repeat whatever motion was set. Being able to lock in a mere three attack patterns wasn't going to do me any good.

The monster's spiked arm rose once again. It left a large hole in the ground, and maybe—no, there was no "maybe" about it—I would have ended up just like that. Cold sweat ran down my face as I recorded that downward swing attack into my first slot, then took a step back. But I didn't back out of the attack range where the monster and I could still reach each other. This was because Mariabelle was still right behind me, so shocked that she couldn't even speak.



“Mariabelle, go find Sharsha. Your mother is somewhere close by.”

I still couldn't speak Elvish, but the mention of her mother's name should have been enough. My voice was just quiet enough that it wouldn't have set the monster off, and I spoke slowly and clearly so she could hear me. All the while, the monster's ferocity and body temperature continued to rise.

I had been on a long journey until then. I had been stripped of everything I had more than once or twice, and killed by monsters more times than I could count. I just wanted to enjoy my fantastical dreams in peace, but monsters often stood in my path with vicious hostility.

Maybe that was why... My instincts were telling me something: once this monster made its move, there would be no stopping it. It would wreak havoc until I was reduced to chunks of meat, and it would continue rampaging through the elven village.

Mariabelle moved to get up, and the monster's eyes turned a deeper shade of red. There was nothing it loved more than fleeing prey. As its muscles bulged and its fur bristled, I pointed my dagger toward the beast in a side stance.

I was calm, and my breath was steady. But as soon as Mariabelle started running, my opponent would move, as well.

Here it comes. It's time to fight.

A battle of life or death that wouldn't have stopped even when blood started to flow. Just as Mariabelle started to run, I quietly opened my mouth.

“I hope this at least lasts more than a second.” This comment was regarding my own ability to hold the line, but it may have sounded like an insult to the monster. It clenched its protruding teeth and thrust out its arm, which went right under my armpit in the blink of an eye. It seemed my experience just so happened to come in handy, as I was miraculously able to leap out of the way.

I already knew what was coming, but it was too late.

The other arm came swinging and impaled the ground with enough force to knock an underground tree roots-up onto the surface. Sweat streamed down from my face as I voiced my disbelief at its incredible power.

I took one, then two steps back, and another attack came swinging at me in an arc from the side. It should have been just out of range, but the spike in its arm extended, taking a few hairs off of my head. I dropped flat on the ground, but this left me completely open. My eyes bulged as the creature opened its mouth and shot several spikes out toward me.

“Whoa, watch it! I really almost died instantly there!”

The spikes landed in the ground next to me as I rolled away, and the monster didn't seem to care much for my complaining. The beast didn't even give me time to recompose myself before it spread out its arms and rushed forward for a tackle. It looked like a tank, running straight for me. If

it hadn't been this place, and if it hadn't been me fighting, it probably would have ended there. I was able to slip behind a large tree by taking another step back, and the explosive collision sent a shockwave through to the other side.

Being scared wouldn't have changed the situation for the better, and Mariabelle was already running away to safety. Now that I had accomplished the main objective, I circled around the other side of the tree and into its blind spot with lighthearted steps, as if I was about to whistle a tune or burst into song. I was planning on using my small stature to sneak up on my enemy... but there was nothing there.

Before me was the sight of a serene forest, and my opponent had vanished like mist. I felt like rubbing my eyes in disbelief, but there definitely wasn't anything there.

Just as I considered whether I had imagined it or not, I noticed a spike had been left at a spot around my eye level. Just beyond it was an arm that was extending to the other side of the tree... and something felt horribly wrong, so I immediately crouched to the ground.

Craaack!

The next moment, the monster's knee came flying around clockwise using the grounded spike as a pivot point and completely obliterated the tree.

"Whooooaaa?!" Surprise didn't even begin to describe my reaction. I couldn't believe the monster had grabbed onto a tree and jumped sideways to deliver a flying knee kick. And it tried to outsmart me just now! I voiced such complaints internally as I rolled on the ground. I thought I deserved credit for immediately raising my sword as soon as I got up. But the beast was closing in on me so closely that I could hear its ferocious breathing. I shrank away as the ground thundered with its approach.

"Argh, so strong!" This creature was deceptively quick for its size, and terribly strong. I was able to automatically avoid its vertical spike attack thanks to memorizing it with Reprisal, but I was screaming internally as I moved in to take this up close and personal.

I could feel the heat of its body and smell its rancid breath. It struck fear into my heart for the first time in a while, and it gave me the feeling that I would have had issues going to the bathroom alone at night. This was far worse than your typical nightmare.

The tree tipped over gradually, soon to slam down to the ground. The noise of the leaves and branches rustling and cracking filled the air like screams of pain. The splintering trunk soon snapped with a loud crack under its own weight.

A strong smell of tree sap filled the vicinity, and something came raining down from above. It was a combination of leaves, branches, a freshly made bird nest, and more. Something fell onto the monster's back, then bounced to its shoulder. At first, I assumed it was just another branch. But that

“something” had arms and a pair of dazzling thighs peeking out from under her dress, with eyes like burning torchlights.

“Quidde-eiqqas-iide. (*Die, you scum.*)”

“Sharsha!”

She sank her sword all the way into the monster’s back, and her lips curled as she whispered something. But the monster slammed its shoulder as hard as it could, as if the wound caused it no pain. Only a sword with a crooked hilt remained there, and the beast immediately unleashed a sharp kick into empty air.

The kick was powerful enough to snap a tree with one blow, but the elven woman clad in a black dress just sank her dual blades into the creature’s ankles, causing blood to spray out of the wound. It seemed Sharsha couldn’t absorb the impact of the enemy’s attack completely, but she landed like a cat on a distant tree a few seconds later.

Finally, reinforcements. And I couldn’t have asked for anyone more reliable than her. Sharsha had a powerful maternal drive to protect her daughter. She looked just as dangerous as the monster as she descended to the ground with her black hair wavering. The forest cut off most of the sunlight, but her burning eyes and occasional glint of her earrings made my heart stir.

Now, the breathtaking battle was just beginning.

It was clear from its bristling fur that Avenger’s predatory instincts had been kicked into gear, and it began to sprint in a bent-forward posture. The animalistic sound of its limbs hitting the ground as it ran had the intensity of a charging tank.

Maybe it changed up its strategy depending on the opponent. A feeling of dread came over me as the spike on the monster’s arm split into smaller pieces, and I immediately started running again. Sharsha and I naturally ended up in a formation on either side of our enemy, which felt like the right move.

“From what I can tell, there isn’t much of a level difference between you and Sharsha. That probably means I’m the one who’s key in this battle.” It may have been strange for me to be thinking about combat tactics when I looked like a kid, but it was very important to have that mindset in this world.

For example, what if I slashed at its ankles as it came charging? It would probably have barely tickled the beast through its thick, wiry fur, but what if I continuously cut the same spot every time it ran? People couldn’t normally pull this off, of course, but I had Reprisal. I used my second slot for this purpose, so I could slowly but surely stack on the damage.

It was all automatic, so I could have landed each hit with my eyes closed. Even though Avenger was only sprinting in less than fifty meter increments, blood could be seen staining its leg more and more. It wasn’t long before the creature whirled around to face me, as if to say, “You annoying little brat!”

There was something I came to realize. Maybe Reprisal, which was widely thought to be useless, was actually an incredible skill. I took one step to position myself in a spot that was easy for my opponent to attack me. And down came that deadly vertical swing attack. But I had already memorized it with Reprisal, allowing me to evade it automatically. I was even able to glance at Sharsha while dodging the attack as she came running up to me.

"Ah, so I should have been baiting it like this," I said to myself as I dodged a spike being slammed into the ground by mere inches. I could smell its breath again, but I was in the perfect position to deliver a counter attack. Although my dagger had a short reach, I was able to use it to attack its arms. It only seemed to cut through its wiry fur, but what would have happened if I programmed this movement into Reprisal? This would allow me to evade and attack at the same time.

And so, I used up the last slot while feeling a little excited, like the prospect of extending a paper airplane's flight range through trial and error.

For now, the best I could manage was to annoy the enemy while dealing a little bit of damage. But if I continued to expand my options, I should have eventually been able to deal with foes that were far more powerful than me.

I smiled at the thought.

"Also, are you sure you should be paying so much attention to me?" Avenger roared savagely in response. Its massive body trembled, letting me know that Sharsha had delivered a vicious slash from the other side.

The beast's neck turned to face her, and it opened its mouth nearly wide enough to split its cheeks open. Then, it once again launched a barrage of sharp fangs out of its mouth like a shotgun.

From my perspective, I couldn't see whether Sharsha was able to dodge the attack, due to the creature's massive body in the way. But the monster changed direction right afterwards and started to sprint with incredible speed. I felt a wave of relief wash over me.

For one thing, Sharsha was able to get away safely. The monster's bloody Achilles tendon also came into view again, as if Sharsha was leading it for me to cut it some more.

She was definitely no stranger to combat. Although she was nowhere in sight, I internally complimented her fighting prowess as I continued to cut away at the monster's ankle. From what I could tell, she had to have been through countless battles. That would have explained her excellent situational decision making and ability to use whatever was available to her on the fly. Not only that, but she realized that I was the key to swaying this fight even though I was physically the weakest one here.

Monsters were far different from animals. Its blood was completely black as it flowed out of the wound, then dissipated into the air. Their seemingly limitless life force and inhuman strength far surpassed that of ordinary creatures, but those traits also made them highly insensitive to danger.

And so, I was able to completely sever its tendon. The beast swerved like a car with its tire blown out, then crashed into a tree and rolled around loudly.

But Sharsha didn't let her guard down for a second. She remained hidden behind a tree, then used the bow she carried with her to relentlessly snipe her target's neck.

The elf woman signaled for me to stay back, and I was finally able to breathe. It was only then that I realized I was completely drenched in sweat, and my clothes were soaking wet. One squeeze, and a waterfall of sweat could have been wrung out of me.

"Aghhh, I'm exhausted!" It wasn't the coolest thing to say at that moment, but I thought I'd earned my right to complain. My dagger was chipped pretty badly, and I wanted to pat myself on the back for surviving through it all.

Then, as I was resting against a tree, something stirred in the bushes in front of me. Out came a white rabbit... no, it was Mariabelle. She looked around cautiously, then ran over to me. She came up right beside me and cocked her head as if to ask me if I was okay.

"Oh, right... Thanks for bringing Sharsha. You really saved me." I wished I knew how to speak her language at times like these. I wanted to express my gratitude, but she only responded with a confused look. And so, I mustered up my guts and decided to show off a term I had just learned earlier.

"Toligg, Mariabelle!" I gave her a thumbs up along with the freshly learned Elvish word. There was a grace to her smile that was unbecoming of her appearance, but it suddenly dawned on me that she was far older than I was. And just as expected, she had the same enchanting smile as her mother.

Thud, thud!

It sounded like Sharsha had taken down her target. I could hear its enormous body hitting the ground from here, and I carefully peered out from behind the tree. The monster finally discarded its instincts as Avenger and was reduced to dust. Sharsha struck a victorious pose, sweat pouring down her face as she flashed a dazzling smile.

"Toligg! Kazuhiho!" They weren't very much alike, but they were definitely mother and daughter. Sharsha came running up to me and lifted me in an embrace as if it was the most natural thing in the world, then patted my head while commending me like a beloved pet.

This was the joyous day when Sharsha really started to like me and Mariabelle deemed me worthy of her trust. I was ecstatic. This meant I would get to officially start learning Elvish, after all.

The sky had become clear before I knew it, and it was hard to believe we had just taken down a massive monster, with the cheerful laughter in the forest.

Dirt crunched under someone's foot as they stepped forward on the hill. In his hand was an ancient staff, and a somewhat relieved expression was on his face. An elven man equipped with a bow and arrow stepped up to his side, then lowered his weapon as tension left his body. The man with the bow removed the hat from his head, then turned to the man beside him with a dissatisfied expression.

"...I don't normally let others interrupt my hunts," he complained.

"I understand getting in a huntsman's way is poor etiquette. But it seems there was no need for us to make an appearance on this stage. Do forgive them."

"Hmm, I can't say I understand what it's like to be a parent, but a stage that doesn't even allow applause sounds pretty sad to me."

The white-haired elder nodded in agreement, a somewhat forlorn expression upon his face. He was an elf, as was apparent from his long ears, and the staff in his hand signified that he held the highest social ranking. But something about his expression felt very human.

"Ah, I wish I could have shown Sharsha what I'm capable of."

"So that's how you really feel... Though, I think simply watching over them is commendable, too. No need to worry. The battlefield isn't the only stage where a man can show his worth. Once we finish repairing the altar that was destroyed in the storm, I'll bring out my secret alcohol stash."

And yet, the woman in question was a warrior to the core, and he knew fixing an altar would do nothing to tug at her heart strings. She would only think he was doing something strange and look at him oddly.

The elder let out a sigh, then looked down again. There stood the woman he loved, holding Mariabelle and the boy in her arms. She had become so much closer with their daughter than before.

It was said that adversity strengthened the foundations, but he couldn't help feeling conflicted as her father.

§

A short tail swung from side to side.

Mariabelle was quite adept at handling spirits, and could even have the Fire Lizard adjust to low temperature. She was also able to pick it up in her arms, and it just blinked its beady eyes while she carried it around.

"Goodness, I can't believe I have to study again today. But it's cold outside, so I suppose it works out," she said as she walked through the hallway made of hardened mud. But her light footsteps made it hard to believe she was complaining, and the Fire Lizard's tail was swinging more widely than usual.

Now, why was she in such a good mood despite being known for being hard to deal with and disliking humans? She opened the door, and the answer was in the biscuits that laid upon the table. The mismatched snacks seemed like they would taste rather subdued yet sweet. Having already tasted them herself, she couldn't help but feel her appetite increasing. There was a steaming cup of tea there, as well. Her expression nearly

loosened into a smile, but she quickly composed herself into her usual serious demeanor.

"Ahem. Good job preparing snacks again today. Kazuhiho, I will check to make sure there's plenty of sugar in there." She began swinging the Fire Lizard even more dramatically, and the spirit looked up at its master with its mouth agape and its little fangs peeking out.

"I met your request, as promised. Let's start our study session for today, shall we?" The boy answered in Elvish with a bit of an awkward accent. He wore a simple type of clothing consisting of a large piece of cloth with a hole in the middle for the head, and a green belt around his waist. The garment had been created here, in the elven village.

It had been six months since they began holding their study sessions in this room. On the other side of the thick boards was a winter landscape, and they had basically been spending their time living in hibernation. Their food storage was precious, so sweet food like biscuits was quite valuable. They had a particular craving for sweets on days like these when the wind was chilly.

The boy opened the big language book with Mariabelle sitting at his side. Paper, too, was precious, and so they handled the pages with much care.

"Oh my, I've already learned most of the common language already. That includes reading *and* writing, of course. How about you?"

"It'll take me some more time before I can learn letters. It's difficult like I thought, but it's interesting and full of beautiful sounds. I'm really having fun learning it."

Elvish was a complex language, and one had to be careful with its pronunciation, or statements could have ended up becoming rude in meaning. It sounded like a song, so it may have been difficult for poor singers to learn. But the boy's pronunciation was improving by the day, and Mariabelle became able to speak the common language even more eloquently than him.

She was quite intelligent to begin with. Whenever she put her mind to learning something, she absorbed knowledge like a sponge. In fact, she wasn't satisfied with just learning the common language, and she had started learning the main languages from the western region, as well.

In a sense, the boy may have been the perfect instructor for her. He had a mild-mannered personality, and the two of them were full of curiosity. The more they learned, the more fun they had, which made their studies all the more rewarding. The biscuits were just the icing on the cake.

"Hmm, you're a faster learner than you seem. You know how to speak several languages, so maybe you know a trick to learning them?"

"It does help when you know languages that are similar to each other. But honestly, elves are basically straight out of fairy tales, so it's a miracle that I can learn their language. There's no way I'm passing up an opportunity like that."

Mariabelle replied with a noncommittal, "Is that so?" and nibbled the biscuit in her hand. The combination of fragrant butter and flour filled her senses, and her eyes narrowed into a smile. Perhaps the flavor reached all the way up her long ears, because their tips were wavering from side to side.

"Hehe, delicious. Say, where do you get these from? Can you teach me how to make them next time?"

"Sorry, it's hard to gather the ingredients here, and there's no oven we can use. I'll teach you someday if we ever go to a big country somewhere."

The elf girl gave him a dubious expression at his reply. His response meant that the ingredients for the biscuits were obtained in a bigger country and that he made them himself. But there was no such country anywhere nearby, and he hadn't acted like he was the one who made them before this. It wasn't that she didn't believe him, but she looked at him as if she was accusing him of hoarding the treats for himself.

However, this was to be put on hold. There were two hard knocks at the door, and then a black-haired woman peeked into the room.

"Hey you two, today's a great day for a hunt. Let's go have some fun!" Sharsha declared.

"Whaaat? I don't want to go out in the cold," Mariabelle complained.

"Ah, right, you promised to teach us how to hunt. I'd love to go after we're done studying, if you don't mind," the boy replied. Mariabelle protested some more with a sullen expression. The slender elf hated the cold and disliked winter in general. But being left all alone in the cold winter would have been quite lonely, so she debated whether it would have been better to stay behind or not.

The Fire Lizard was sleeping soundly at their feet, its temperature adjusted to that of a hot-water bag. Mariabelle pressed her foot against the Fire Lizard's stomach with her bare feet and let out a glum sigh as she pictured the chilly winter skies outside. In other words, she had made up her mind to accompany them.

Her thick coat was made with brightly-colored fur, and walnut shells were used for buttons. Mariabelle's cheeks were red, but it wasn't just from the cold. She shook her head while voicing her protests to the young boy.

"N-No, I can't. This goes against the laws of nature. I'm sure Father would be upset with me if he found out!" And yet her curiosity seemed to get the better of her. She removed her gloves, crouched down, and touched the water with her finger. She found that the water was warm, and that smile from the morning returned to her face.

This water bank was formed by damming some river water, and was dug out with shovels to add more depth. But how was the river water so warm in the middle of winter? The answer was the several Fire Lizards floating belly-up, blowing air bubbles in the water and keeping it warm. The boy also touched the water, and a satisfied smile spread across his face.

"You really are great at handling spirits, Mariabelle. I'm surprised by how perfect the water temperature is," the boy said with a shovel in hand. He was still breathing heavily from the labor, and sweat was visible upon his face. Sharsha was in a similar state from having helped dig, and she flashed the same smile as her daughter's.

"We went out of our way to stop the hunt for this. I'm going in, even if Marie doesn't want to. Look away, young man," she ordered.

"Huh?" Kazuhiho asked, and as he faltered, the woman stripped bare without hesitation. He caught a glimpse of her dazzling bare skin in the clouds of white steam and looked away in a fluster as he caught the clothes she tossed aside.

Elven women were stunningly beautiful, with facial features that seemed like they were sculpted straight out of mythology. Just closing his eyes for a while wasn't enough to wipe the image from his head, and the boy could feel his cheeks grow hot even without going into the water. The water rippled outward as the beauty entered the water and let out a soft sigh.

"Ah... this feels amazing. Yes, I can see how Ozbell may scold you about this. At this rate, I may not be satisfied unless I come back here at least once a week. Marie, why don't you go home with Kazuhiho if you're afraid of your father?"

"No! I've been enduring the cold all this time, and I've been looking forward to this. There's no way I'm going home now." It seemed Mariabelle finally set her resolve, and she began to undo her walnut shell button... then shot the boy a glare. But he wasn't the type to peep on someone undressing, and besides, his head was already covered with Sharsha's clothing and he was facing the other way. Seeing his bright-red ears, she gave him an order in a strict tone of voice.

"Kazuhiho, keep an eye for anyone trying to sneak a look. I won't be able to get married if anyone sees me like this." Kazuhiho wanted to leave as quickly as possible and raised a thumb without looking back. Sharsha laughed in response.

"What? That boy already saw you naked the day you met."

"Oh, stop that! That was an accident, and he didn't get a good look... Hey, you didn't see much, did you? We were underwater, after all," Mariabelle asked as she dipped her toe in the water, and the boy's ears turned a brighter shade of red. Having trained his kinetic eyesight in this world, Kazuhiho was quite adept at recognizing things, no matter the situation... And so, he folded the pile of clothes and set them aside on the rocks, turned his back as if to apologize, then ran off.

He left behind the young girl's screams, her mother clutching her side as she laughed boisterously and a wild deer turning its head in surprise. The elven forest was lively, peaceful, and a place where conversations were neverending. This was indeed a new discovery for him. He had thought this forest would have been full of quiet people living in harmony with nature,

but it was quite the opposite. They were cheerful, full of life, and always welcomed change into their lives.

Ozbell, the elven leader who was a symbol of their way of life, stood at a footpath as if he had been waiting for the boy. Kazuhiho was surprised to see him there, and the older man smiled in his usual, gentle way.

"Come with me," he said quietly.

The sound of shoes hitting the stone pavement could be heard as they walked.

They were in some run-down ruins, and the roof that was built to stave off the rain was no longer serving its purpose. Ozbell led the way, walking forward with purpose.

He was always one with nature whether it was hot or cold, and this was the man who lived most like a half-fairy among the elves. Ozbell walked with his large staff and spoke without turning around.

"It may be a bit cold for humans. No, come to think of it, Mariabelle is far worse in the cold than you are."

"Yes, though Sharsha seems completely fine in this weather." The elder chuckled in agreement.

"That's just the kind of woman she is. She far exceeds elves in physical prowess. Ah, but what a shame. You've managed to learn Elvish, but you must have been disappointed to find out you're not suited to be a spirit user."

The boy thought the way Ozbell had said Sharsha "far exceeded elves" was a bit strange, but the following statement banished that thought from his mind. He hung his head as if a massive weight had fallen upon it, and said, "Yes, I was..." in a quiet voice.

"Hahaha, I apologize, I didn't mean to laugh at your efforts. Spirits can be quite difficult to understand, and they're far too peculiar for humans. Their uses are limited, too, and are only convenient for walking through dark caves and cooking, so I wouldn't worry too much about it."

"I guess you're right," Kazuhiho said with a sigh, but lighting and cooking were precisely what he wanted spirits to help him with, so it didn't do much to ease his mind. As a solo traveler, he had often dreamed of such companionship.

"I thought perhaps it could happen, but it seems miracles don't come by so easily. So, I take it your will to continue your journey hasn't wavered?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to leave after being in your care, but I'd like to go see the snowfields to the north before the winter passes." The boy had already made up his mind on the matter. He had been accepted here, but he was no elf. He couldn't bear living there for many long years, and he would one day become incapable of going out on a journey. It was evident from the look on the boy's face that he wanted to see everything this mystical world had to offer before that happened.

"Marie was so happy to make a friend. I'm sure she'll be sad to hear it. She often spoke of the time you saved her from that monster like it was her favorite folktale."

"Huh? But I don't deserve the credit for that. That monster was after me because of its nature as Avenger. The whole reason it came after Marie was probably because my scent was on her."

The elder turned around as if to say, "Really?" and the boy nodded as if it was obvious. It made sense, considering the boy who specialized in fleeing had faced the monster head on. Realizing that his action was fueled by a feeling of obligation rather than valor, the elder made a face as if he didn't know what to say.

"Have you told my daughter—no, I suppose not, since you two just recently learned how to communicate. In any case, be sure not to tell her what you just told me. Promise me." Kazuhiho nodded awkwardly to the elder's strangely forceful promise. He had a feeling something terrible would have happened if he refused. Not by the elder's hands, but Mariabelle's.

Now, Ozbell still hadn't told Kazuhiho why he had brought him to these ruins. He wondered if this seemingly reticent man just wanted someone to talk to, but his purposeful strides told him otherwise. When the elder spoke to him again, the topic took the boy by surprise.

"My wife is originally a dark elf by blood. That's why she is far more hardy and unfazed by the cold."

"Huh?! What do you mean? Her skin, personality, and everything about her don't match what I know about dark elves from the stories." The boy wasn't denying the elder's claim, but wanted to understand. He trusted the elder's words and knew he was speaking the truth. Even so, he felt that Sharsha was far too different from the dark elves that were hated by the world.

Ozbell didn't respond, walking right by the stone table where he had once sat with the boy. He continued into a dilapidated corridor and descended down some stairs. Wind could be heard howling through the cracks in the walls.

The boy wondered where they were as he looked around cautiously. There was something strangely vague about the floor and walls, and even when he touched them, there was about a second delay before he felt the sensation on his skin. As the boy felt bewildered by the divergence in his senses, Ozbell spoke to him in his usual tone.

"This forest must feel very strange to you. It should have been sealed off, but only you were able to enter. Mariabelle, who is so young despite being almost one hundred years old... Sharsha, whose blood is hated by the world and is far more powerful than elves... And I, the elder, have been protecting these ruins despite the fact that no one can even approach it." Ozbell's mysterious words were as unhurried as his steps.

After spending many long months with him, Kazuhiho understood the elder's personality. His statements seemed disconnected and lacking any hints at first glance. But the way he said them one after another meant they were all connected, and the fact that he brought him to this place was a hint in itself. Whenever Ozbell asked a question, he often provided what was necessary to find the answer.

"Her appearance was altered? It's pretty rare for perceptions to be altered like that, so maybe the influence of spirits is too strong..." Kazuhiho muttered to himself, deep in the labyrinth of his own deduction. His surroundings turned dimmer, plunging him into a blackness darker than the night. And yet, he managed not to trip thanks to the light spirits floating around Ozbell's staff.

A thought crossed the boy's mind. The spirits had appeared so naturally without being summoned. It was as if they had determined that they should have been there. Which meant their influence had increased so much that they could alter one's perception, and the boy realized he was in a far more dangerous place than he had imagined.

"Don't tell me... we're not in the human realm?" Ozbell raised his eyebrows in surprise. It told Kazuhiho that he was right, and that the elder found enjoyment in seeing how observant the boy was. He chuckled quietly, then slowly turned around.

"Quite a profound deduction. Just as your appearance strays from the truth, everything you see has a chance of being a lie." A heavy, metallic noise rang out all around them. Then, a vertical line stretched out before them, gradually increasing in width. Light spilled out from there, and Ozbell stood with his back to the light and his arms spread wide. That familiar, gentle smile from when they had first met was on his face once again.

"Do you feel as if you are dreaming? Have you felt you are different from other people? I have been observing you quite cautiously to find out what guided you here, and why."

Behind the elder was a golden, flowing river. Or was it wind? It consisted of countless layers, and it was brimming with seemingly endless life force. It seemed out of this world—in fact, the sight certainly was something from outside of the human realm.

"I would not lie to one who has found the answer. Beyond this point is the spirit realm, and the origin of creation. A place that will never wither, but if it did, the world itself would perish. And..."

Ozbell beckoned the boy over. He motioned toward the golden field with his other hand, like a traveler stepping onto a newly discovered land of abundance. But the boy didn't move. Seeing him wait for his next words, Ozbell continued.

"...And if you stay here in this land, you won't be able to awaken." The elder motioned for the boy to follow again as he stepped into the golden field.

A strange feeling held the boy back. He had always thought this place was just a dream, and for the first time in a while, it felt like a nightmare. Cold sweat trickled down his back, and his breathing grew more labored. The realization that he was witnessing the unknown in his dream tonight was setting in.

A footstep clicked against the pavement. It was Kazuhiho taking a step toward the golden field. He had always pursued the unknown, and he wasn't about to change his ways now. And so, he lined up next to Ozbell, who stood there with his robe billowing. The elder turned to the boy, the same gentle expression in his eyes. Finally, the boy brought himself to speak.

"...It's so beautiful. What are these ruins?"

"It was made by the ancients long ago, to prove the existence of the spirit world. Just for that one purpose."

Mariabelle, whose growth was stunted due to the influence on her mind...

Her mother, whose dark elf blood had been purified...

And Ozbell, who had continuously protected this land.

They were all connected. There was a secret to the sacred land where other races were not allowed to enter, and there was a vagueness to it, just like the spirits themselves. Ozbell explained it all by showing rather than telling. He opened his mouth again, this time to explain something else.

"You carry a heavy mission on your shoulders. Perhaps it's too heavy for your small body. So if you ever forget upon waking, come seek me."

"Mission...?" Kazuhiho seemed to want answers, but Ozbell led him by the shoulders, as if to say staying any longer would be dangerous. The boy looked back reluctantly, and the elder spoke to him as he stared at the bountiful field.

"I'm certain it is my own mission, and the reason I was led to this place." The door closed with a heavy thud, and a warm breeze caressed the boy's cheeks. The elder's gentle eyes told him there would be no further hints for now. And at the same time, they told him the answer would come to him someday. Ozbell showed the boy a different smile, as if to indicate there was nothing else he wanted to tell him for now.

"Oh, and the reason I scared you a bit earlier is because you saw my wife naked. I'm sure you understand, being a man yourself. Ah, and be sure to keep this a secret from her. There's nothing uglier than a man's jealousy." Ozbell grinned, and Kazuhiho found himself speechless. The lovable look on the elder's face confirmed that he, Sharsha, and Mariabelle were family after all.

This dream was so full of strange experiences that he wasn't able to forget about it for some time.

§

The windbreaker coat was thick, yet short in length so it wouldn't get in the way during travels. It was neatly woven with threads all the way to the

end and seemed very durable. Kazuhiho turned back from the coat to Mariabelle, whose purple eyes were a bit swollen today.

"Agh, I just don't understand you humans. Why would you depart on such a cold day like today? You must be out of your mind," she said.

"If I go north from here, I'll get to the Gastuya Snowfields in a month or so. I'll be all alone in a world of white and blue. Doesn't that sound cool?"

She looked at him as if she didn't understand at all. It seemed women were realists no matter where they came from, and it was hard for them to understand men's passions. But she did understand that this was important to him and didn't try to stop him. Instead, she presented the object that she had been hiding behind her back.

"Wow, that's a nice staff. What's that for, Marie?"

"I made it with my father. It turns out that not only do I have a talent for spirit magic, but sorcery, too. So, I suppose I've obtained the rare class of Spirit Sorceress."

"Whoa!" Kazuhiho responded with wide eyes, and Mariabelle made a smug expression upon seeing his reaction. "Congratulations, Marie! I knew you were amazing since we first met, but the elder finally acknowledges you now, too!"

"Hmhm, you can compliment me more, if you'd like." Although she played it cool, her cheeks were turning red with elation. She turned her face away at his congratulations, but the tips of her long ears were drooping slightly. The boy held her hand in his. Her small hands were completely covered by his, and they were so warm that she forgot about the cold for a moment.

"Thank you for teaching me your language, Mariabelle."

"...It was nothing. Um, I'm sorry about being so horrible to you in the beginning." Before she knew it, she was squeezing his hand back, despite the fact that she once hated humans. The words they wanted to tell each other were stuck in their throats, and they stared at each other in silence for some time.

Just as their meeting was sudden, their parting was sudden, as well. After moving away from Mariabelle, Kazuhiho waved as he left the village, and she waved back in response. He eventually disappeared into the woods, the handmade coat he wore becoming obscured by the trees.

After some time, the girl realized something. Those busy, yet fun days were now gone. He wouldn't have been there to talk to her or study with her anymore. He wouldn't have been there to try new things or teach her about unfamiliar worlds. The weight of this emptiness pressed heavily upon her, and she found herself crouching down on the ground.

Fallen leaves were piled up thickly around her. They would soon have been replaced with soil.

She hugged her knees in the cold wind and let out a white puff of breath. Her father and mother were absent, perhaps so she could learn the weight of what she had gained and lost for herself.

Thinking back, there was a sadness in the boy's expression when they had first greeted each other. It was so strange back then, but she understood now. He was already thinking of this day to come. He almost seemed like he was about to cry, picturing the inevitable day when they would have to part ways. Mariabelle was oblivious to the pain of saying goodbye, but he knew.

She sniffled, but didn't cry. She was sad and full of regrets, but she knew one thing for sure.

She had to take action. Even if she was alone, she wanted to accomplish something. She didn't want to be left behind, and at the very least, she didn't want to lose to Kazuhiho.

Mariabelle rose, then began walking as snow started to fall. She gripped her staff with both hands, and the air she exhaled was warmer than earlier. And as the snow fell, the girl became one step closer to becoming a woman.

It was when the snow had melted later in the winter that she moved to the Alexei region.

Her pale purple eyes watched as a carriage rolled by loudly on the stone pavement. Behind it was a building made of stone, reminding her of the lush trees that were no longer around to see. Mariabelle could almost feel herself getting choked up and let out a quiet sigh.

She had moved to the capital of the Alexei region, an area that was quite advanced in terms of sorcery. A year passed, then two, then too many to count with the fingers on both hands. She had found the vehicles created by humans interesting once, but they were just in the way now. The elf had to keep her long ears perked up and alert to avoid getting run over.

She had achieved the rare class known as Spirit Sorceress, but it wasn't respect or accolades that she received in the human city; in fact, it was the opposite. As someone who was taken into the academy for training sorcerers as an honor student, the expectations and bullying from other students was as suffocating as the gray skies above.

"It's all your fault, Kazuhiho," she muttered to herself on the roadside. There were none of the sweets she had looked forward to so much, and the food tasted bland and borderline spoiled. She had spent many days wandering around the city in search of the biscuits she'd eaten during her study sessions, but she had given up on them by this point. Her disappointment was so great that she now told herself that the snacks had been part of Kazuhiho's ploy to lure her out to the city.

To top it all off, summoning spirits was restricted in the city, making it all the more uncomfortable to live there. On frigid winter days, she spent her nights shivering in bed, wishing she could have summoned the Fire Lizard to warm herself up. Every time she vented her frustration, she was filled with the desire to return to her forest, and she cried in isolation at times.

Mariabelle sighed and kicked a pebble.

She had thought it would all have been more enjoyable. There were accessories and clothes being sold in shops, and she spent her first day walking around with an excited glimmer in her eyes, but she unfortunately didn't have money to spend frivolously. Her dreams and hopes were shriveling by the day.

She quietly devoted her days to her studies and learned about sorcery. Her life was quite the opposite of fun, and she found herself thinking of the forest often. Everything was so full of fun then, but those days would never return. Humans experienced growth far quicker than elves, so that boy must have been a full-grown adult who was old enough to have a family of his own by now. So they could never play together like they had so many years ago ever again. It was impossible. She knew that, but just as she sighed and pictured those days of the past, she heard a familiar word being spoken.

"Kazuhiho? What kinda name is that?"

Mariabelle whirled around in the back alley. There was no mistaking that ridiculous name, and she could feel her heart pounding. How did that sleepy-looking boy look all grown up? Did he become a bit handsome, at least? Or...

"K-Kazuhiho!" She shouted without thinking, then a muscular man turned to her in the alley. No, she didn't recognize that man with chestnut hair. She shooed the stranger away, and then a black-haired boy standing just behind him met her gaze.

"Huh? Marie? What are you doing here?"

"Wh-What am I...? Y-Y-You!"

Any guesses on how manly the boy had grown to be would have been off the mark. He was mostly unchanged, with that same sleepy face, and his height had only increased by a few centimeters or so. Mariabelle marched over to him angrily with her shoulders back and pointed at his drowsy-looking face.

"You haven't changed one bit! What in the world?! Are you actually a fairy or something? Or maybe the spirit of sleep?"

"Of course not. I've grown to be a lot manlier since we last met, you know. See, I'm a little taller... Wait, you got taller, too, Marie? I guess not much has changed, then." He chuckled, and Marie felt a shock that nearly left her dazed. There was no mistaking that sleepy face, and just standing next to him made her feel a bit sleepy herself. There was a faintly sweet scent about him, and Marie sniffed around with her sensitive elven nose.

"Oh, right, I have some snacks with me. If you have some free time, what do you say to catching up over some tea? My treat, of course, o great lady Spirit Sorceress." The muscular man beside him widened his eyes, surprised that Kazuhiho could pick up a girl so casually despite his seemingly absentminded demeanor. An exceptionally cute elf girl, at that.

Even more surprising was the girl's drawn-out but eager reaction. She fidgeted around and muttered a reply.

“S-Sure, I don’t mind. I’m actually really busy, but I suppose we could, if you insist.”

The man couldn’t help but do a double take at the younger boy’s face.

The Alexei region was the forefront of sorcery research and home to its many restless residents.

Mariabelle had found her experience there quite stifling, but not now. Perhaps she was planning to talk his ear off with boastful stories, for her expression had completely changed into a cheerful smile, and her steps were as light as a feather. She turned around, and their eyes met. They smiled. It was as if they hadn’t changed since those days they spent together in the forest.

— Meeting Mariabelle the Half-Fairy Elf —

Afterword

Hello, this is Makishima Suzuki.

Thank you very much for picking up this book.

Half a year has passed by so quickly since Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf! has been novelized, and the series now has volume 5 out on sale.

I believe it's thanks to everyone's support that we've come this far. I'd like to express my utmost gratitude in this afterword.

One spring full of blooming cherry blossoms, Mariabelle unexpectedly arrived in Japan. Japan is quite a hectic country in my eyes, but with its food, culture, and forms of entertainment, it must be a fresh and exciting place that piques her curiosity. I stopped visiting the once-familiar libraries once I became a working adult, but it must be a treasure trove to her. As such, it really sank in that Japan is actually a wonderful country while I was writing this book.

They say your eyes become clouded as you become an adult. I feel as if I've been making less and less new discoveries as my days are filled with the sight of my commute and workplace. This book is also a story of making new discoveries through Mariabelle's eyes. I think it's pretty uncommon to go on domestic trips for novels like this.

I've gone sightseeing in the regions I've traveled while writing this book and researched stories about Aomori and Mount Iwaki. The preparations were as thorough as if I were going on a real vacation, though I can't remember the last time I went on a trip for leisure. (*laughs*)

I believe learning new things and being fascinated by them are experiences that enrich our lives. Whether it be something like anime or manga, I'm sure Mariabelle felt joy unlike anything she'd ever felt before upon discovering them. On the other hand, Kitase was surely having the time of his life when he first stepped into the elven village.

Speaking of having fun, I've been quite busy writing, but there has been much joy in the process, as well. To Yappen, who always draws such adorable covers and illustrations, I always look forward to your art. To Shimo Aono, who has brought the comic version to life, I always read your work with a smile on my face. This is published on the Comic Fire homepage, which is run by Hobby Japan, so I would be thrilled if you could take a look. I'm sure you'll encounter a free-spirited and lovable elf, and every title there is high quality and enjoyable to read.

"Literary professional" may have an intellectual ring to it, but it's actually rather plain in reality, and we just sit in front of our computers and type out words. But I find it a fascinating experience when those written characters turn into illustrations and manga and speak to us through speech bubbles.

Now that volume 5 has come to a close, it's time to say goodbye to spring and its fresh verdure. This marks the beginning of summer and vast

blue skies. With the comfortable season at its end, will Ms. Elf suffer through Japan's trademark sweltering nights? Or will she be the only one sleeping soundly at room temperature? There's no telling what will happen, but she will surely be adorable even while sweating profusely. All the better if she ends up picking out a swimsuit for the pool.

I hope you look forward to the next volume. And please be sure on release day to tell her, "Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!"

Welcome to
5 Japan,
Ms. Elf!



"NYAAA!
THE STREETS!
THE STREETS
LOOK SO
CUTE!"



"Fwaaah..."
Marie let out a
strange sound.
We hadn't arrived
at Grimland
proper quite yet.
Being a theme
park that was the
pride of Kanto,
the streets
leading there
were quite well
decorated.



"MARIABELLE,
I'VE ALWAYS
HAD FEELINGS
FOR YOU.
I'D LIKE YOU
TO GO OUT
WITH ME,
IF THAT'S
OKAY WITH
YOU."

The wind blowing from the east really did feel refreshing, and I stared at the girl with hair as white as the clouds. She was so precious to me. And there was one thing I realized through all of this. It seemed Mariabelle was far more important to me than I'd thought. Before I knew it, I was speaking my honest feelings out loud to her.

Meeting Mariabelle the Half-Fairy Elf

I had no idea a girl was bathing there. She sat on a protruding rock, using the splashing water as a shower and scrubbing her body while humming cheerily.

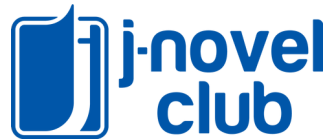












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Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf! Volume 5

by Makishima Suzuki

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